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An Airmont Romance

Nurse Of The Midnight Sun

MARY COLLINS DUNNE

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For my sister, Joan

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The plane moved steadily on its course over central Alaska. From her window seat Cory Hanson peered out and saw emerald green as far as the eye could travel. It was a day in early June, and the green was threaded by a sparkling river and laced with ice-blue lakes. Above this panorama rose a range of snow-coiffed mountains. Cory noticed a wide swath of churned-up yellow mud, dotted with black machinery. The saffron swath looked like a pleated velvet sash draped across the dark green landscape.

"That's a placer gold dredge, one of the few left," said the man beside her as he noticed her interest. He told her that he worked for a mineral company involved in a different method, that of deep mining. "I live in Seattle and make several Alaskan trips each year." His name was Leon Rand, and he, too, was headed for Kovarik.

Later, when the man's attention was again on his magazine, Cory's thoughts returned to her unexpected trip. Now that she was actually in Alaska, now that the hastily planned flight from Oregon was nearly over, she felt a stir of misgiving. Had this been

a foolish thing to do, to fly with little or no warning to Paul? When they had become engaged six months ago, hadn't they decided to wait until his engineering stint in the North was over before they married?

But Cory hadn't known how dreary those six months without him would be. Paul had warned her that he was not a good correspondent. His letters were few, and she missed his warm presence with an aching loneliness that grew stronger day by day. It seemed that she had nobody now. Her widower father had settled in New England to be near his son and grandchildren. Cory's two closest friends, Beth and Katie, had recently married and moved out of Portland. Gail, her new roommate, was sweet-tempered and generous, but she had company and phone calls at all hours, so that peace and privacy were forever disturbed.

To complete Cory's state of restless dissatisfaction, a new charge nurse had come to the ward, a woman who made daily life intolerable for everyone within her sphere. Cory's breaking point had been last Monday's shift, when the domineering Miss Bullock had all the little student nurses in tears and had made nervous wrecks of everyone else. Alone, doing charts at the nurses' station, Cory had asked herself spiritedly, Why stay in the clutches of this impossible-to-please tyrant? A person could end up cowed and ulcer-ridden. In her impulsive way she had quit.

On the crest of her newfound freedom came thoughts of Paul. If only she could see Paul! Before she stopped to reconsider, Cory had dashed off a let-

ter to his remote address, telling him that in a matter of days she would follow the letter to the town of Datlow Springs.

Next she sublet her half of the apartment to Judy, a new desk clerk at the hospital. She had cast a concerned eye over her stereo, her record collection, and a few other painstakingly acquired possessions, hoping that Judy was not as lax and careless as Gail. One of the interns had expressed an interest in her rattly little car ever since she had mentioned a desire to trade it in, so Cory decided this was a good time to sell it to him. Soon all loose ends had been attended to, and she had exchanged most of her savings for a round-trip plane ticket.

A vacation, that was what it would be, a wonderful trip to a state she had never seen. Since there was no pressure of a job deadline for her return, the vacation could possibly be an extended one, or at least would last as long as her money held out. Best of all, at the end of the journey there would be Paul, surprised and delighted as he folded her eagerly into his arms.

Cory recalled, when they had met eight months ago, how depressed Paul had been over the break with his father. He had confided to her in detail how he and his parent had never gotten along. Her interest seemed a healing balm to him.

"It's the first time," he told her gravely, "I've ever met such a truly understanding girl."

And all her instincts of generosity and selflessness had surged out in response to him. Before Paul left for Trask Valley, they had become engaged.

Cory's attention swung back to the present as the plane approached Fairbanks. In spite of her eagerness to reach Paul, she regretted the tight schedule that prevented her from seeing this northern city, even in a desultory way. Hopefully on the way back she would have a chance to stop off and explore it.

The aircraft landed smoothly, and soon the passengers disembarked. The mining man from Seattle, Leon Rand, strode along beside Cory. He appeared to be in his late twenties and had a strong, stocky build and a tanned face that was open and pleasant.

Cory's violet-blue tweed suit matched her eyes; her thick brown hair was held back by a long silver clasp. She was not a beautiful girl by commercial standards, and there was no empty prettiness in her thin, piquant face. Her irregular features wore a resolute look, and there was a certain distinctive jauntiness in her step.

There was a forty-five-minute wait before boarding the smaller plane that would take them to Kovarik, so she and Leon Rand joined several others for coffee. Talk flowed casually, and gradually Cory eased herself out of the conversation. She preferred to let her mind wander as she sipped the hot beverage. Maybe Paul would not be there to meet her. This unplanned trip might very well clash with work schedules in the remote Trask Valley area. Well, she would manage. There must be some sort of public transportation from Kovarik to Datlow Springs, her final destination. In one of Paul's few letters he had written that Kovarik was the nearest village to his work.

She glanced at the ringless fingers of her left hand. She had been deeply moved when Paul mentioned giving her a ring that had belonged to his dead mother, but so far he hadn't had the opportunity to do it. She let her hand drop to her lap. Wasn't the wedding ring, which she would be wearing soon, the important one?

Only about half a dozen passengers boarded the small plane for Kovarik. Again Leon Rand sat beside Cory, talking in a congenial way. After they were airborne, she told him her reason for the trip.

He turned and looked at her. "And your boy friend isn't expecting you? What a happy surprise to give him! An engineer on the Trask job, you say? That's a huge operation."

He answered a number of her questions about the project and then revealed some personal data. His wife of four years had died over a year ago. There were no children. He lived alone in Seattle and made frequent business trips north. After a while he changed the subject, pointing out an elderly Eskimo couple with weathered brown faces.

"I know them. They've been visiting their son, who's a mechanic in Fairbanks."

Realizing that they were being discussed, the pair smiled and nodded in a quaint, dignified way. Cory's picturesque conception of dog sleds and crude tools jarred with the reality of technicians, engineers, and air travel, and she quickly reassessed her ideas about present-day Eskimos.

As the plane neared the small Kovarik airfield her attention drifted from Leon Rand and the passengers

and centered on Paul again. It had been so long since she had seen him. She felt quivery with hope that he would be there to greet her. Wouldn't the same longing be burning in him, too? But among the handful of people waiting at the gate Paul's tall figure did not appear.

No matter. She had half known it would be impossible for him to meet her on such short notice. She proceeded to the baggage pickup and soon found her two suitcases with their neatly printed little tags. She asked Leon about bus service to Datlow Springs, which was sixty miles away.

"There's no bus."

The girl bit her lip. "How about a car rental?"

"Wait a minute," Leon said. "I just thought of something."

Cory felt a rush of gratitude for his help, whatever it would be. She had a sudden sensation of being alone and ill-prepared in this alien place. During her twenty-three years she had traveled across the United States several times, but never alone.

"There may be someone driving that way," Leon was saying. "Quinn will know."

Cory followed his husky figure to the small airport bus, taking deep breaths of the clean, bracing air. How blue the sky was, how crystal clear the atmosphere.

Kovarik, set in a natural bowl between the mountains, was a small town, but it was a busy center for several important industries, including timber and mining. Cory's eager observation found it attractive

in a raw-boned, unique sort of way. Starkly modern buildings of eight or ten stories stood side by side with one-story log houses. As the bus continued toward the main section of town, Leon pointed out a narrow-gage railway circling a mountain, and riverboats plying the wide channel. Hunting and fishing were also big here, with many guide services and stores featuring outdoor clothing and equipment. An attractive school stood on the outskirts, and in town they passed by a small hospital, a movie theater, the City Hall, several banks, and a number of restaurants and shops. The residential sections climbed partway up the hillsides, the neat, low homes set among vivid greenery.

Leon took Cory to a ground-floor office on one of the main streets; it was the agricultural headquarters to which farmers from outlying districts often came. A dark-haired young man with alert gray eyes unwound himself from behind a cluttered desk. This was Quinn Toland, a local agronomist. His sinewy spareness, straight posture, and agility of movement made him seem taller than the average height he was. As Leon set down the suitcases he introduced Cory, explaining her need of transportation.

"You're in luck." Quinn smiled, his strong teeth looking very white in his sunburned face. "A family on their way there was just in here. Let me try to get hold of them at the restaurant." He made a quick phone call and then told Cory that the people would be starting for Datlow Springs in less than an hour and would be glad to give her a lift.

Before Leon left, he shook her hand and wished her a nice visit, and she thanked him for his help.

Quinn got her a chair. "First time here? What brought you to this part of the world?"

She told him she was paying a surprise visit to her fiance, whom she hadn't seen for six months.

"Checking up on him?"

She flushed at the words and at his quizzical smile. Then she had to laugh as she realized that, although she had never admitted it, this was at least partly true.

"Is he in Datlow Springs?" Quinn asked.

"No, Trask Valley. He's a civil engineer."

"The project men come into town at intervals. I know some of them. What's his name?"

When Cory told him he repeated it slowly, squinting in concentration. "Guess I don't know him."

"You're connected with agriculture?" Cory asked, making polite conversation. Quinn nodded.

"I suppose I'm pretty ignorant about Alaska," she confessed. "I always thought it was too cold to grow anything except trees."

"In some parts there's nothing but vast areas of tundra," he said. "But with knowledge and proper methods, you'd be surprised at the successful crops of grain and vegetables that are produced in a lot of the sheltered valleys. Dairy farms are fairly common farther south, too. The summers are short, but there's many extra hours of daylight."

At that moment the family appeared in their big

dusty station wagon. After Cory joined them, Quinn waved at the doorway and wished her good luck.

The Lamonts were in their mid-thirties and had a lean, dry, Midwestern look about them. The man's hair, skin, and eyes were all in varying shades of brown. The light-haired woman's spare frame still retained traces of a youthful slenderness. Two little girls with blonde braids sat in back with Cory, who asked the couple about the Trask Valley project. The Lamonts knew a few construction workers from the hydroelectric plant, but not Paul Farron.

They had come out from Iowa four years ago. "Most Alaskans come from somewhere else, you know," Edie Lamont said with a smile. Her husband, Luke, had claimed one of the one-hundred-and-sixty-acre homesteads offered by the government, and they were holding their own on it.

"We debated on which part of Alaska to settle in, and decided on the Interior."

"Not an easy life," Luke admitted. But at least they had their land and were free of many of the pressures they had been under back home. During the summer they made an occasional trip to Kovarik to get supplies and a short taste of town life.

"A lot of the roads are poor and dusty here," Luke commented. "Most travel is done by air."

Cory exclaimed repeatedly at the beauty of the countryside, the meadows ablaze with poppies and the deep forests of spruce and hemlock. Living in Oregon, she had become used to superb scenery, but

this land had a quality all its own. Late afternoon seemed like morning as one of the North's long summer days stretched on. Several big planes roared overhead, and the Lamonts told Cory they were from Bristow Air Base.

Cory was charmed by the children, Sue and Debbie, who were six and nine. Shy from being country-bred and seeing few people, they soon were coaxed into joining the conversation by her gentle persuasion.

Such a tiny isolated village Datlow Springs is, Cory thought when they finally reached it. There had been nothing of size since Kovarik. In winter it must be desolate, but now it had a jewel-like setting with the flowing river, the lush meadows, the woods, and, always in the background, the majestic mountains.

"I guess it looks wild to you." Edie Lamont had read her expression correctly. "But it's funny; when you get used to it you like it that way. We look on the hunters almost as intruders when they start coming through."

"It's very beautiful," Cory said with sincerity.

Luke pointed to the east where, he said, lay the springs that gave the village its name.

"What's the river called?" Cory asked.

"The Oralo. Well, here we are," he added cheerfully. The main area consisted of a general store with a gas pump out in front and a cluster of small businesses connected with mining, farming, and lumber. Part of a sawmill could be seen in the distance, and a few houses were spaced out along the road.

"Which direction is the Trask Valley project in?"

There was something in the way Luke waved an arm carelessly toward the north that made Cory lean forward. "How far?"

When he told her, she sank back in a cloud of disappointment. So far away! She had come all this distance, and she was still miles and miles from Paul. "I thought it was closer to Datlow Springs."

"No. Everything's spread out a lot here. It's in the middle of nowhere. Got to fly in and out."

So she wouldn't be with Paul as often as she had hoped. "You can drop me at the hotel or rooming house, please," she said. As the couple's eyes widened Cory asked anxiously, "There is some sort of hotel, isn't there?"

Luke shook his head and looked for a moment at his wife. "I guess the doctor's would be the best place for you to go," he said, and Edie nodded. Cory thought he suggested that because she had told them she was a nurse. The real reason was that Dr. and Mrs. Swift had the largest house in the vicinity.

"The doctor's semiretired now," Edie told her. "Heart trouble. Supposed to slow down. *Supposed* to." She smiled and shook her head. "They've lived here more than twenty years. Built that place themselves. Put on an extra room to use as a dispensary. Luke stayed there one time for two days when he had his shoulder slashed."

Cory felt a touch of nervousness. The last thing those busy people would want was an unexpected house guest.

Dr. Swift's home was indeed the most imposing, made of logs like the others but larger, as Edie had

said, and had a certain grace and charm about it. Antlers decorated the gate behind which bloomed a colorful flower garden.

The doctor wasn't at home, but Charlotte Swift, a middle-aged woman with a serene face framed by graying hair, welcomed the newcomer without hesitation. Her observation took in Cory's slender frame, creamy skin, and dark blue eyes at a glance, and went on to notice her shy demeanor. It was clear that this girl did not usually thrust herself upon people unannounced. The journey seemed to have left her bewildered in some way.

The Lamonts went on, the children vigorously waving good-bye to Cory. The Swifts' handsome husky dog, Skookum, took stock of the girl and apparently approved of her as Mrs. Swift showed her about the place. They had a little three-bed dispensary in addition to their comfortable living quarters. A large stone fireplace dominated the living room, and the mantel held a display of carved ivory figurines. Fur scatter rugs lay underfoot, and over the sofa was thrown a bright Indian blanket.

"Your home is delightful," Cory said, impressed by the style and originality that the Swifts had shown in decorating their log house.

Over coffee she told the doctor's wife of her impulsive visit.

Charlotte smiled. "That's the only way to do things, on the spur of the moment." She knew Paul by sight. He had passed through Datlow Springs several times. "I can understand why your letter hasn't

caught up with him yet. Some of the crews are in remote areas."

Cory felt as she had before, that maybe she had done a stupid thing in rushing up here to Paul. But Mrs. Swift's easy acceptance pushed the worry aside.

"The people here are very nice," Cory said, and told of Leon's and Quinn's help.

"Rand? With Bellamondo Mines?" Charlotte put a curved finger to her chin as she concentrated. "Yes, he's in and out of Kovarik a lot. Nice fellow. We met him last summer shortly after he lost his wife." She knew Quinn better. "Quinn worked all around Alaska, then settled in Kovarik."

"With his family?"

"He's not married."

"I heard there was a scarcity of girls here."

The doctor's wife laughed and shook her head. "True, but that's not why Quinn's still loose. Scarce or not, he has his share of girl friends, here and other places. That's the way he likes it—free and easy."

The doctor came in then, a quick-moving, forceful man with a head of reddish-gray hair like a lion's mane. He seemed delighted to find company in the house and suggested that they call some neighbors together the next evening, since it was seldom that they had a guest so recently arrived from the lower forty-eight. His enthusiasm rose even more when he learned that Cory was in the medical profession.

"Ah, we can use nurses here!"

"But I'm only on a vacation, Doctor. After I visit with my fiance for a while, I'm going back."

"Paul Farron, is it?" He stroked his chin and looked speculatively at her. "And you've come here to bring him home?"

"I wish I could."

He gazed at her a moment with that same kindly, reflective look, and then murmured, with a little half smile for his wife, "Ah, impetuous young love!"

Cory laughed and couldn't help blushing a little, too.

She hadn't realized how tired she was, and that night she slept like a child under a downy-soft quilt in the Swifts' married daughter's bed. In the morning it took her several minutes to realize where she was. Then it came back in a rush. Paul, she thought, I'll soon be seeing Paul.

Dr. Swift was busy with calls all day, and Cory recalled that Edie Lamont had said he was supposed to take it easy.

Charlotte took her guest sightseeing for several hours in the pickup truck. She was proud of the area, which, she said, reminded her in many ways of Montana, where she had grown up.

"Look at that part of the river—full of logs!" Cory exclaimed at one point.

"Yes, they're being rafted down to the mill. Most of the homesteaders work there part-time."

The Swifts' daughter, Linda, lived in Juneau with her husband and child, and it was clear that this little family was the Swifts' pride and joy. Cory felt flattered that they had given her Linda's room.

When Cory mentioned paying for her room and board, Charlotte said lightly, "It'd be a poor thing if

we couldn't put up a little nurse while she's waiting for her lover."

"But I'd have to pay if I were at a hotel."

"In a hotel they don't make you dry dishes and help around, do they?"

Cory vowed to herself that she would somehow make it up to them.

That evening Dr. Swift was as good as his word, and friends began dropping in to meet Cory. The Lamonts came, a couple named Dupre, and several other farm families. Buck Vego, a bush pilot who lived halfway between Kovarik and Datlow Springs, brought his wife and their two teen-age sons.

"Buck and other bush pilots," Charlotte confided to Cory, "are lifelines up here with their little seaplanes that they can land practically on a dime. They rescue hunters and climbers, bring in vital medicine, take injured people out, do everything you can think of, often at a risk to themselves."

Cory regarded with awakening awe the unassuming man who had chosen this dangerous profession for his way of life.

In all the crowd there was only one girl close to Cory's age; she was tall and had an arresting face framed by tousled black hair. When they were introduced, Roo Ellman showed the polite interest and mild curiosity that everyone extended to a stranger in town. As she moved away Cory tried idly to figure out with whom the girl had come. Finally she asked Edie about her.

"She's not a permanent resident. She comes and goes. Right now she works at the general store and

post office." She pointed unobtrusively to a ruddy-faced man. "Jim, who runs the store, is her uncle."

"Roo; it's such an odd name," Cory mused.

"Short for Ruthann."

"She's pretty." With which opinion Edie agreed.

Edie herself looked nice this evening in a gray and pink summer dress. Cory told her so, at which the woman seemed shyly pleased. Cory assumed that Edie, as a farm wife, practically lived in pants and shirts, but she had a definite air of femininity about her.

A little later Cory noticed something that caused her to wonder in earnest about Roo, the dark-haired girl. Mrs. Swift had finished greeting several newcomers and was pointing toward Cory, saying in her hearty voice, "Meet our little visitor from the Outside. She's engaged to Paul Farron, one of the Trask fellows, and traveled all this way to see him."

As Cory turned toward Charlotte her eyes were caught by a slight movement. Roo, at the edge of a group of people, had suddenly jerked to attention and stood motionless for a moment. And from then on Cory was uncomfortably aware of Roo's scrutiny.

The guests settled into chairs and chatted as they sipped drinks or coffee and sampled various breads and cakes that the wives had brought. While Cory talked and answered questions, her mind was on the tall, striking-looking girl and her reaction to learning who Cory was.

It's simple, she told herself. That girl and Paul may have had a few dates when he came to town. What was wrong with that? During the six months of

her engagement Cory had not cut herself off from men as though they were a plague. She had sometimes double-dated, everything casual and platonic. She could tell Paul, and he could tell her of any dates he might have had.

Nevertheless, she couldn't help wondering why Roo had jumped as though stung by a bee when she heard that Cory was Paul Farron's fiancee.

2

A week passed with no sign of Paul. Dr. Swift wanted to send word to him about Cory, but for some reason that she couldn't quite explain, she dissuaded him. It was bad enough for her to come barging into Datlow Springs, taking Paul by surprise and inflicting herself on the Swifts. But to drag him from his important work because of her whim would be too much. No, she would wait. He would come in good time.

While she was waiting, though, couldn't she give Dr. Swift some help? That would be one way of reciprocating for their hospitality. The doctor accepted her offer with a pleased nod.

"Good! You can come along when I make calls, and assist in the dispensary at other times."

"He can certainly use your help," Charlotte told her in a grateful tone. "I did quite a bit until the old arthritis got so bad." She held out her hands, whose stiff fingers were curled like the legs of a horseshoe crab. "I can still do some things, but not like I used to." She told Cory that they had begun married life together as a doctor-and-nurse team, first in Montana, then here.

"Nathan's not supposed to overdo any more. But try telling him that!"

Cory, in brown pants and a yellow sweater, went with the doctor that day on his rounds. She had brought no sturdy footwear, so Charlotte loaned her an old pair of Linda's boots, which were a fair fit. Cory remembered to smear her face and hands with the insect repellent she had bought, to try to deter the biting insects that often appeared in persistent clouds.

As they drove along the doctor told her that the people in this area considered themselves fortunate to have a resident doctor—himself—and a small hospital and another doctor only sixty miles away in Kovarik.

"In many areas there's no medical care for hundreds of miles. Help has to be flown in by helicopter and pontoon planes. There are a number of military hospitals here, and we all help each other."

"Is the population rugged and healthy as a whole?"

"Yes, to some extent, except for a high TB rate among the Indians and the Eskimos." The doctor's face darkened as he told Cory that stronger preventive measures and better care were sorely needed, despite a smattering of free government medical facilities. He went on to speak highly of the Kovarik hospital, run by Dr. Gozallis and his small staff. He pronounced the name "Goes-alice." "They don't do brain surgery or heart transplants," he admitted with a smile, "but it's very well equipped, considering."

Beyond the sawmill, which was the town's main in-

dustry, lay a cluster of little homes, many of them occupied by Eskimo families. Cory remembered how her father, who had been stationed in the Far North during World War II, had told stories about Eskimos using discarded oil drums to make rude shelters. That was a far cry from the people here. While retaining many of their customs and traditions, these Eskimos lived in the same way as the Caucasian villagers. The children won Cory's heart. Their half-shy way clashed with their natural exuberance, and usually their bubbling merriment won out.

One family, the Egruks, had several robust children and one little girl, Betty, with a chronic kidney ailment, whom the doctor liked to keep his eye on. Cory's interest was caught by a boy, about eight, who darted in and out like a shy, wild little animal. After they left she remarked about him.

Dr. Swift said, "Yes, Tommy Egruk's an odd little kid, sort of slow about ordinary things but bright as new copper in other ways. His father, Charlie, is a logger."

A few miles farther away the doctor looked in on a man close to sixty, who lived with his married daughter.

"Pa's getting so cranky I don't know what to do with him," his daughter said in a low tone to Dr. Swift.

Cory glanced at the grizzled figure seated with one leg propped up. She could sense the discontent in his restless movements and tone of voice, and marveled at how the doctor succeeded in bringing to him a measure of serenity.

"Fred was active all his life with hunting, fishing, the outdoors," he explained to Cory as they drove away. "Now he's got a severe vascular problem, and his difficulty in adjusting to a sedentary state is almost as serious."

As the day wore on Cory admired the doctor's manner as well as his experience and skill. The gentle hand, the probing eye, the pertinent question, and most of all, the true concern. She could see at a glance that here was a man who was not only depended upon but well loved.

They visited some outlying farms. Luke Lamont, clearing away brush, waved to them as they bumped along the road. Apparently Dr. Swift's gray jeep was known to everyone.

All week Cory had thought about Roo Ellman off and on, wondering if there really had been something between her and Paul. Her first assumption that it was only a passing friendship began to give way. All the ingredients for romance were there, she thought glumly—Roo's beauty and availability, Paul's virile good looks and lonesomeness. When Dr. Swift remarked that he wanted to stop off at the post office on the way home, she was both reluctant and eager to get another look at the girl.

But only Jim was handling the business. As he and the doctor chatted of local affairs Cory browsed aimlessly around the variegated establishment. Maybe Roo was on a coffee break, or perhaps this was her day off. Before they were ready to leave, she could no longer control her curiosity, and asked in parting, "Where's your niece today?"

The man gave a genial shrug. "Gone again." He glanced at the doctor. "You know how Roo comes and goes, restless as a bird."

"Back to Fairbanks?" asked Dr. Swift.

Jim shrugged again, holding out his hands, palms up, and Cory felt an unexpected rush of relief that Roo had left town.

Cory didn't know if the Swifts arranged it or if it was just the natural friendliness of the Alaskan people, but during the following week she was treated like a visiting celebrity. People stopped by and she accumulated several gifts—a small ivory carving, a few pairs of Indian beaded moccasins, and fur gloves. The thought occurred to her that she could use the gloves next winter when she went skiing in Oregon with Paul.

Luke Lamont came for her one day, saying that Edie was expecting her for dinner. It turned out to be one of Cory's most enjoyable evenings. The Lamont home was plain and partly unfinished, with much work still to be done, but they had put their stamp of coziness and individuality on it in many ways.

"We set our table mostly off the land." There was unmistakable pride in Edie's voice as she served, with a flourish, some foods indigenous to the area. Game birds that Luke had bagged—"Grouse," he said in reply to Cory's question—rice fixed in a tasty way with herbs and vegetables, and blueberry pie for dessert.

"Me and Debbie and Mom picked the wild berries yesterday," Sue boasted.

"Delicious! Oh, make it just a sliver this time." Although Cory felt stuffed, she couldn't resist a second piece of pie.

After dinner Luke surprised Cory by producing a guitar, and they all began to sing familiar folk songs and ballads. Later he went to do some outdoor chores, and the children retired reluctantly to their loft bedroom.

"Good coffee's my weakness." Cory held out her cup again. "For me it replaces cigarettes, alcohol, other things people find comfort in."

"I'd be lost without my coffee, too," Edie confessed. Then she asked, "Cory, how long have you been engaged?"

"Six months. We decided right after Christmas."

The conversation was interrupted as Edie went to tell the giggling girls to quiet down. "They can't believe it's bedtime because it isn't dark," she sighed over her shoulder.

Alone, Cory turned her mind to Portland, to the rainy night in late October when she had met Paul Farron. She had been at a spur-of-the-moment party at a nurse's home, and he had come as a friend of a friend. After they met they had sat apart from the others, and Paul talked to her as though he had known her always.

He had taken her home—Cory's eyes shone with fond reminiscence of how they had run, hand in hand, with their heads bent down through the rain to his car. All through November and December they had dated steadily, and the holiday season had been a

magical time. Nothing had seemed quite real since this electrifying love had come into her life.

"He had to go north in the middle of January," she went on when Edie returned, "for a while to southern Alaska and then in the spring to the central part. So we had an understanding before he left."

"It's been a long time for you both to wait," Edie said. "What a surprise and thrill it'll be when he finds out you're here!"

I hope he comes to Datlow Springs soon, Cory thought for the hundredth time.

Two days later the Dupres took her for a boat ride in their motor launch. She discovered that the water was a common mode of transportation in this part of the state. The craft were used for practicality rather than for pleasure.

"From the shore the river looked so calm," she remarked. "Smooth and green, no white water. But I can see it's much deeper and swifter than I thought."

Harry Dupre nodded. He was an easy-mannered man whose face had an odd, squashed look about it, which was emphasized by large pale eyes and a nose like a wad of putty. "The Oralo's not big compared to other Alaskan rivers, but it has a good, strong current." He pointed out a tributary that, he said, was a good fishing spot.

"You should see the river after the spring thaw," his wife, Marge, put in; "it's full of big jagged ice chunks crashing along."

The following day Cory had another unexpected sightseeing jaunt. Quinn, the agronomist from Kovarik, landed his little two-seater plane on a field

outside of town that served as an airstrip, and then made his way to Dr. Swift's. He said he was in the vicinity and wondered if Miss Hanson would like an aerial tour.

"*Would* I?" Delight flowed through Cory as they started off. She wore the lemon-colored sweater and tied her thick hair with a narrow brown leather thong. How thoughtful of this man to spend time entertaining her! She glanced at his profile. Quinn hadn't the handsome, clear-cut features of Paul—nobody had!—but he was attractive in a rough-hewn sort of way.

He pointed out locations as they soared higher. The land was a colorful spread of vivid meadows edged with darker green trees, golden squares that were grain fields, and bright patches of wild flowers. Through it all the Oralo curved, a glistening ribbon tying the quilt together. Quinn said that in Alaska distances were so vast that small private planes were a necessity, not a luxury, especially the kind that could land on water or snow.

"Ever see a big glacier?"

"No."

They flew on, and soon she was awed by the spectacle of an immense blue-white ice mountain below, and beyond it the glittering ice field.

Within the confines of the small aircraft it was natural to feel a certain sense of closeness. As Cory looked at Quinn's strong hands and listened to his deep unhurried voice, she became very much aware of his masculinity and recalled Charlotte's words about his many girl friends.

Quinn had been in Alaska for several years. He had been born and bred in rural Colorado, where his parents still lived, and he had a married brother in Denver. After agricultural college he had worked in the western United States for a couple of years and then came north, eventually settling into his present position.

"I'm not saying I'll stay in Kovarik for the rest of my life," he told her, "but right now this job is what I want to do." Cory was caught by the enthusiasm in his voice. He liked his work and felt that he was contributing something, fulfilling some inner goal.

"It can be pretty tough here, and I give the farmers a lot of credit, especially the homesteaders. They take that uncleared land and work hard for years to make it productive. It's true that a big percentage who come don't stay, but those who do seem to find it a satisfying life." He threw Cory a crooked smile. "Well, let's hear about you. Where are you from?"

"Born near Boston, lived in a lot of different places." After she gave him a synopsis of her family history and activities up to the present, Quinn was silent for a few moments. Then he said slowly, "Devotion, loyalty—they're practically lost attributes. I didn't think there were any more steadfast women. Yet here you are, waiting for—what's his name?—Paul, waiting all that time and now following him here on your own." The quick glance again, the little shake of the head.

A familiar defensive feeling rose up in Cory. Two or three of the Swifts' guests the other night had

seemed astonished, even amused, at her frank pursuit of Paul Farron. But now her defenses quickly subsided. She realized that Quinn was paying her a compliment. In a tone tinged with a shade of wistfulness he had given modest praise to her initiative and tenacity of purpose.

When the sightseeing was over and he had flown away, Cory sat at the living-room window in a thoughtful mood. Quinn had a lot of appeal. Later, over tea, she found herself trying to draw Charlotte out about him. Sure enough, a little subtle probing revealed why he held romantic loyalty in such high regard. It seemed that he had encountered the opposite to some degree.

"There was a girl when he first came here," Charlotte said reflectively, "but I guess it was all one-sided. She went off to Fairbanks one day without a word. Quinn followed her and found she had someone else. It took him a while to get over it. Then a year ago he and a young teacher at the grade school in Kovarik were getting serious. She was a nice girl but she didn't like Alaska. After her first winter she said she'd had enough. She wanted him to go back to Illinois with her, which he couldn't do, so that was the end of that." She took a long drink of tea. "He sort of changed after that, as far as girls go. No involvements, simply plays the field."

"Doesn't he trust them?"

"Guess not. But you can see how he likes people in general. He's a good mixer with a nice personality."

Cory thought, I hope someday he meets the right

girl. But she said no more about Quinn. The conversation drifted on to other things, and after a while Charlotte went to put her aching hands in a hot-water bath.

3

June was into its third week before Cory saw Paul. It happened so unexpectedly that it took her breath away. She was helping out in Dr. Swift's dispensary, giving booster shots to the Johnson children. She paused when Charlotte poked her head in and called to her, and something in her tone immediately alerted Cory. It was low and serious, different from Charlotte's usual hearty voice. At once Cory's blood began to race through her veins.

The doctor nodded at Cory to go, and she rushed into the waiting room, oblivious of the patients. All she saw was Paul. Paul, big and vital and dear, here at last, standing just inside the door. Cory flew across the small room and clung to him with her head pressed against his chest.

"Oh, Paul, Paul!" She had had so many fears—that some horrible accident would happen to him, that when the company finished this northern project, they would start building another, that he would become ill and call feverishly for her, and no one would know. Foolish fears, all of them, for here he was, strong and real in her arms.

She became aware of Charlotte's motioning them

into the living room, away from the interested eyes that were fastened on them. In a daze of happiness Cory shuffled along to the other room with Paul.

Then they were face to face. Her eyes went over him hungrily. The set of his shoulders. The well-shaped head. That springy wiriness in his brown hair. But a trickle of fright began to run through her. Something was wrong. Why was his face so taut and strained?

"Paul, what's the matter?"

For some reason he was not happy that she had come to Alaska. They stood apart, and the trickle of fear became a torrent, washing away her hopes. To be without him all those long months, to travel so far, and now he was beside her yet making no move to hold her, to press her close in the way of which she'd dreamed.

"Cory, I came as soon as I got your letter."

She struggled for a light touch. "I can see why it takes so long in this wild country."

"It wasn't that." There was a heaviness in his voice. "The letter arrived but I wasn't there. I had—left."

She gazed at him, not understanding.

Paul took a deep breath and then plunged in. "Cory, I'm married. Just recently. That's where I was —away getting married."

Cory felt as though he had struck her, but she stood rooted to the spot, with only her sinking heart in motion. Married! Of all her fears, she had never really visualized this. Seeing other girls in the normal

course of events, yes. But he was promised to *her,* he had given his word and pledged his fidelity.

"—going together," Paul was saying in a tense way. "You've got to understand, Cory. It all happened in a big rush. I was going to write and tell you about it. Then to my amazement I heard you were here." For the first time his eyes met hers. "I'm sorry it turned out this way." His right hand riffled nervously through his hair. "I never thought you'd come here —" His voice broke off.

With a great effort Cory pulled her collapsing senses together. "I shouldn't have come. It's been six months. Anything can happen in six months." She managed to add, "Good luck, Paul," before her voice thickened treacherously. She had to get away at once. Her composure mustn't crumble in front of him. That would be the final indignity.

She turned blindly and realized just in time that she was headed for the crowded waiting room. Was there no place where she could be alone for a while with her shock and grief? She stumbled toward the kitchen door, already feeling tears stinging her eyes. The last thing she heard was a footstep, as though Paul had started to follow her.

From the kitchen Cory made her way to Linda's room—*her* room for the few happy weeks in which she had anticipated the joy of reunion. For a long time she sat on the edge of the bed and cried in torn, ragged spurts with her hands over her face to muffle the sound.

Finally she sat up and shook her head, trying for a

measure of equanimity. She must get to Kovarik at once and fly home. She didn't want to stay in this untamed place one hour longer than was necessary. There were lots of things to do—packing, seeing about a lift to town—but first she must make herself presentable. She hurried through the small hall to the bathroom and bathed her face in cold water, glad that Charlotte was not around. For a few moments she held a wrung-out washcloth over her burning eyes, then gazed at her mirrored reflection in despair. Oh, Lord, she certainly looked the part of the jilted girl, with red eyes in a grief-swollen face.

I was too complacent, too sure of him, she told herself bitterly. Tears came again in a rush and she couldn't hold them back. Paul, even though he had been away from her, was a part of her for so long that she felt a great yawning emptiness now. My life isn't over, she tried to reassure herself. Things like this happen to people all the time. But plain reasoning did not remove the terrible void.

Cory forced her mind away from what had just happened and pressed the cold cloth against her eyes as she tried to concentrate on practical things. She would no doubt have to wait until tomorrow to get to Kovarik. But how could she face the Swifts? It was humiliating to be rejected. Everyone knew she had followed Paul Farron north. Now it would be common knowledge that he had turned her down for someone else.

A new thought hit her. Who was the girl he had married? Cory dried her eyes slowly. All at once her mind was filled with Roo Ellman's pretty face be-

neath the mass of dark hair. It must be Roo. She had gone to meet him, they had some sort of rendezvous. Probably they had made wedding plans months ago. Or had it been a sudden, impulsive marriage?

Wearily Cory hung the towel on the rack. Paul belonged to somebody else. What difference did it make who she was?

In due time she discovered that there would be a three-day wait for her plane reservation. Cory felt as though she couldn't bear it. She abhorred being pitied. Everyone for miles around would know what had happened. This little bit of human drama would enliven their quiet lives, and they would seize it eagerly.

To her surprise she found that she was wrong. The attitude of the Swifts over her dilemma reflected the feelings of the little town. Charlotte and the doctor were warm and sympathetic, but they did not belabor the point. They went on cheerily with the business of daily living, behaving as though they expected Cory to do the same.

When she ventured into the general store, Jim nodded and smiled in an understanding way. He was too honest to resort to evasion.

"That niece of mine is full of surprises," he said, slowly shaking his head. Then he continued his work as usual.

My guess was right, Cory thought; Roo is Mrs. Farron. Although she asked herself impatiently, Who cares? she couldn't get Paul and the girl out of her mind.

The way that people in Datlow Springs looked at

things was at least a relief. Apparently they believed in quickly bringing a subject out into the open and then laying it to rest. Maybe it was because the basics of living were so important that gossip became a superfluous commodity. So during the following three days Cory came and went without feeling that she was the target of everyone's eyes.

She felt especially at ease with Edie Lamont, and once or twice she wondered why. What did a city girl have in common with a farm wife more than ten years her senior? A few weeks ago Cory would have said, "Nothing at all." But now she could sit for hours at a time in Edie's snug kitchen, with talk flowing or not, and feel as though she had known this thin fair woman all her life.

In the presence of others she put up a good front, but inwardly she was filled with doubts about herself. She must be unattractive and inadequate if she couldn't hold her man. Never having overflowed with self-confidence, she now felt a deep inferiority complex taking hold of her. Was it only because Paul had been lonely that he had turned to Roo Ellman? In his loneliness why hadn't he written more often to Cory, answering the steady stream of affectionate letters she had sent him during the past half year?

The answer was that the other girl was beautiful and more desirable. Cory was quite plain and ordinary after all, not a girl who would stand out in a crowd. She remembered her rapture when she and Paul had become engaged. She had been surprised, actually, that this handsome, exciting man had wanted her to be waiting for him upon his return.

She recalled wryly how she had compared him with the husbands of Beth and Katie and found those men so sadly lacking.

Well, live and learn. She tried to smother her bitterness and to hope that Paul and Roo would be happy, but it was at best a grudging wish. As for herself, she would go home and find a job.

Then embarrassment would raise its head again. She would have to admit that her engagement was broken, that her romantic flight north was all for nothing. How could she endure explanations and condolences?

Come to think of it, there was not much to return to Portland for—no family, close friends, or an established job. Cory gave a deep sigh. Well, it would be a starting point, perhaps for moving somewhere else and meeting new people. In any event the role she had expected to assume in life this year and the next was now drastically changed. She would have to learn to change and adapt, too. But all the while she tried to reason things out, her heart cried, Oh Paul, why her? Why not me?

One thing was certain. Unpalatable as returning home was, Cory could hardly wait to leave this big alien land to which she had come with such bright hopes. The few days dragged on interminably, and she counted the hours till departure.

Charlotte wanted to have people in, but Cory talked her out of it. She had said her good-byes to the Lamonts and one or two others. "I'd rather slip away quietly, if you don't mind," she told her.

"Whatever you say."

On Thursday afternoon she packed her suitcases. Her lips tightened as she remembered taking special care in selecting the clothes she would bring—Paul's favorite colors, the most flattering styles. She gazed dully at the little dangling name tags, recalling how she used to practice writing "Cora L. Farron." Had the bride, the real Mrs. Farron, ever indulged in such foolishness?

It struck her as ironic that Roo's uncle, Jim, was the one who offered to drive her to Kovarik early the next morning. He said he had business there. She had a feeling that he was doing it because he felt involved, since it was his niece who had usurped Cory's boy friend. At any rate she appreciated his gesture, because she knew it would be difficult for Dr. Swift to take the time off.

The afternoon stretched out endlessly, typical of the long Northern summer day when twilight never seemed to come. Cory felt no appetite for the roast duckling and other dishes that Charlotte was busily preparing as a festive farewell dinner for the three of them.

She helped the older woman in the kitchen, and the conversation was lively, but Cory's mind was only halfway on it. Spooning home-preserved cranberry sauce into a small bowl, she murmured replies while thinking, At least I saw something of Alaska, so the trip wasn't a total waste; then she argued with herself, Who do you think you're fooling? You'll always have bad memories of this place.

About four o'clock they heard the jeep screech to a

halt beside the house. Charlotte said, "Well! The doctor's home already."

Nathan Swift was always quick-moving. Now he burst into the house like an Arctic storm, even ignoring the effusive Skookum.

"Char, there's been an accident at the mill! I don't know how many men are hurt!"

Charlotte hurried forward, wiping her hands on her apron.

The doctor caught sight of Cory. "Lucky you're still here, little nurse. Come on—we're going to need you!"

4

Dr. Swift's gray jeep bumped over the dusty road. Cory sat up very straight beside him. She had hastily thrown a jacket over her outfit of navy pants and red jersey blouse, grabbed her handbag, and tied a scarf around her head. Charlotte, her fingers bent and sore, had been left behind to prepare beds, if needed.

Cory's heart pounded with apprehension at what they might find at the sawmill. Could she endure the sight of mangled bodies, the sound of agonized moans? She had fainted once, to her chagrin, in training, under less primitive circumstances. Was her experience in well-staffed, antiseptic hospitals any preparation for this raw emergency? She clenched her hands together and begged silently, Oh, let me function as a good nurse!

A pair of hawks swooped down in great circles, and the music of small songbirds sprayed from the trees. The jeep drove past birch and pine groves and a few little straggling farms. Cory clutched her purse as they approached the bend of the Oralo. When they reached the mill they saw a cluster of parked vehicles, some of which had pulled in crookedly in obvious

haste. The jeep ground to a stop, swirling up new clouds of dust.

Inside a knot of people were gathered, among them Harry Dupre, whose flat face was pale with distress. A stir went through the crowd. "Here's Doc Swift now!" someone cried.

"This way, Doctor."

Cory hastened after him as he began to ask questions.

"No," a man in a plaid shirt replied. "Lucky the machine was off."

The doctor raised his hands, bag and all, in a gesture of relief. "Thank God!"

They soon discovered what had happened. The floor in one section of the mill had collapsed without warning, sending four men into a maze of machinery. Had it been running, they would have been killed instantly.

"No one killed, thank God," Dr. Swift said in a low tone to Cory. "We'll probably have fractures and lacerations."

She nodded numbly, following him along through the debris. The victims had not been moved. Fellow workers had slipped a folded coat or a jacket beneath the heads of three of them. Sam, the fourth one, was shakily trying to sit up against a wall.

"I think Charlie's hurt bad," the plaid-shirted man whispered.

Cory remembered Charlie Egruk, the Eskimo logger whose home she had visited when the doctor checked on his little girl. Now seeing him like this,

her breath caught in her throat, and she held on for a moment to a splintered piece of lumber.

Charlie lay twisted sideways, motionless, with his eyes closed. His face and shirt were bloody, and blood was still seeping out of one shirt arm. One of the workers, who had learned a few medical procedures while in the service, had just applied a tourniquet to the affected arm. Charlie's right pants leg was ripped as though giant teeth had angrily ravaged the cloth. Ruptured blood vessels had caused discoloration of the skin, and the flesh below his knee was torn. Cory guessed that a broken bone had protruded and then slipped back.

The doctor's terse voice steadied her. "He's unconscious from the pain. First thing we have to do is control that bleeding."

Charlie's pulses were rapidly checked. A sterile pressure dressing was applied and the tourniquet released. From his medical bag Dr. Swift removed supplies with which to clean and stitch up the wound.

"His blood pressure's low. We'll start an intravenous going. Cory, check his pulse and blood pressure at frequent intervals."

Now attention could be given to the broken bone. "Looks like a compound fracture." The doctor shot out orders, some to Cory, the last one to the men hovering by. "Get me a lightweight board about this size, and strips of cloth or something for tying."

The girl's fears took flight as she assisted him. There was simply no time to feel nervous. She ap-

plied sterile dressings to the wounds, and Dr. Swift hastily improvised a splint for the broken leg.

"We'll have to keep him immobilized," he told the men as he straightened up. Cory hurried along after him to the other injured men.

"A bad puncture wound, among others," the doctor pronounced after a quick examination of the next victim. "Clean and dress it and give him a tetanus shot."

Cory's hands flew. There was so much to do! Take the patient's pulse, clean and dress both the incised and the puncture wounds. She rolled up the man's sleeve and administered a tetanus shot. His skin was cold and moist, his pulse weak. She suspected shock and heard the doctor say to the men, "Keep him lying down and put some kind of light cover over him."

She knew that he wanted to keep the blood flowing toward the chest and head and to prevent loss of body heat. This man was younger than Charlie. His light hair was matted with blood from scalp lesions, and he groaned weakly now and then. Cory had the fleeting thought that it was fortunate that the sharp piece of metal, or whatever it was, had hit his arm rather than his chest, where a lung might have been pierced.

As they moved on she was vaguely aware that the men were telling Dr. Swift that Bristow Air Base had been contacted and a chopper was on its way.

She took the next man's vital signs. He didn't seem to be having any respiratory difficulty. "He's breathing okay."

"All right. Pressure dressing."

She wrapped wide gauze tightly around the lacerations to stop the bleeding, and then Dr. Swift administered Demerol. The wrist and fingers of one hand were swollen and discolored, either from sprains or fractures, and the doctor immobilized the hand.

Later Cory took the pulse and blood pressure of Sam, the fourth man. He wanted to go home, mumbling that he had got off lucky with no harm done except a pounding headache. He appeared somewhat dazed and kept holding his head in obvious pain.

"Lie down, Sam, and stay quiet till we take care of you," Dr. Swift ordered.

Cory knew that he feared possible concussion. Examination of the head showed a swollen, discolored area of moderate size that was bleeding slightly.

Sam grumbled, "I want to go home."

"I know, I know," the doctor said, but you've had a violent shock. I've got to X-ray that hard head of yours later."

The roar of the military helicopter was soon heard. The three seriously injured men would be taken to the hospital at Kovarik. For the present Sam would go to Dr. Swift's dispensary.

Cory wiped the back of her hand across her damp brow. Never, since she had received her degree, had she worked as quickly or under such adverse conditions. During the process a burst of admiration had flashed through her at Dr. Swift's competence in handling the emergency. All her thoughts had centered on assisting him. If she had had time to reflect on it, she might have felt that here in Datlow Springs she

would at last come into her own as the dedicated nurse she had dreamed of being since she was a little girl.

The whole area was shocked by the accident. Before the victims left the mill, it became the scene of an influx of friends, relatives, and neighbors. Everybody pitched in. There was a wonderful spirit of comradeship in this aid to the men who had had a terrifying brush with death. And although all were willing to help, few were truly qualified.

More than once Dr. Swift said to Cory that it was a blessing that a professional like herself had been here at this difficult time. And later Charlotte told her, "Fate brought you here when you were needed." Cory couldn't help thinking, however, that it was a perverse fate that had foiled her objective in coming to Alaska.

As the litters were brought in Dr. Swift asked Cory if she would fly to Kovarik Hospital with the injured men. Feelings of fear and reluctance ran through her at the thought of such responsibility. But with the doctor seeming to depend on her, and with everyone looking on, she hadn't much choice.

Before she left, Nathan Swift clasped her hand and said warmly, "You did all right today, Cory."

At these few words of praise she felt more pleasure and gratification than she had felt about anything for a long time, and a little surge of self-confidence as well.

A uniformed man was in the helicopter, along with the pilot. Cory felt a great rush of relief to learn that

the lieutenant was a medical technician from the base.

"I can't say how glad I am that you're here," she confessed. "I've never been in a helicopter before, much less with several patients."

"Don't worry. It'll be fine."

The injured men, safely strapped onto the litters, were brought inside the copter, and Cory, under the medical technician's directions, helped him to secure the litters to the floor.

"To prevent sliding," he explained.

Cory had just fastened her seat belt when the ground fell away, and a rush of wind and motor noise surrounded them. She glanced down at the receding kaleidoscope of river, mill, and greenery, fascinated. The novelty of the short ride was soon submerged by her concern for the patients; they should be as comfortable as possible. She wasn't overly tired, but she felt rumpled and clammy, and she noticed with scant attention that her clothes were grimy.

Almost before she knew it, they had reached the Kovarik Hospital and the Air Force men disappeared. The injured were established in the small ward, bringing its occupancy to full capacity. Cory gazed about with interested eyes. The neat ten-bed hospital and small outpatient clinic were as compact and efficient as Dr. Swift had described them.

A few minutes later Cory became acquainted with Dr. Gozallis. He was a tall, thin man in his mid-forties with sparse sandy hair. His voice surprised her by its depth and resonance when he replied to her question about the accident victims.

"They're going to be all right. The fractures are being set and the casts applied. They're comfortable and in good spirits." He gazed at her through his dark-rimmed glasses. "Are you going back to Nate Swift's or staying with us for a while?"

When Cory explained her situation, he nodded glumly and lamented his shortage of help.

It seemed that news of the accident had created a stir in Kovarik. Several townspeople came in to offer blood donations, and among them Cory spotted a certain lean figure. There was something familiar about the singular economy of his movements, and when he turned his slate-gray eyes on her, she realized it was Quinn. He came over at once and asked Cory how she was.

"Fine, thanks, but sort of overwhelmed." She smiled as she pushed unruly strands of hair from her forehead. "Little did I know I'd be pressed into service today!"

Dr. Gozallis turned to Quinn. "Quinn, I'm trying to talk Miss Hanson out of going back to Oregon right away. I told her how badly we need nurses. Can you think of any way we can induce her to stay with us for a while?"

Quinn gave Cory a direct look. He started to speak and then murmured a noncommittal reply. Cory flushed and felt uncomfortable. Quinn knows about the jilting, she thought. He knows why I'm leaving. The people around Datlow Springs may not be gossips, but the grapevine news sure travels fast.

She rallied and said, "I was just here on a holiday."

Dr. Gozallis lifted his shoulders and hands, and

then let them drop. "A pity. Who knows? In time you might like it here."

"I do like it, but my—my interests are at home." She could feel Quinn's eyes on her again. He knew her main interest was here, but lost to her forever.

Apparently Dr. Gozallis neither knew nor cared about the broken romance of a transient nurse. After discovering that Cory was not expected back home by any definite date, he pounced on that fact.

"Would you consider working with us for only a few weeks, then? We're short-handed, and it would be a great help."

More than anything, Cory wanted to leave Kovarik. But the doctor, with his personnel overworked and her dropping providentially from the sky, was not easily put off. His need is so obvious, I should stay for a while, she reflected. Anyway, if putting miles between me and Paul Farron is my objective, Paul's already accomplished that. By now the newlyweds have probably completed their honeymoon and Paul's returned to his job at Trask Valley.

Cory sighed and told Dr. Gozallis she would work for him for about three weeks.

"Thanks, Miss Hanson. I appreciate it."

I'll bet he usually gets what he wants, she thought, but in his work he needs that sort of determination.

Before hurrying off, the doctor told her that May, the secretary, would help her find a place to stay.

"I'm going to work here. Well, I didn't expect *that*," Cory remarked to Quinn.

"A day of surprises for you?"

Several days, in fact. But she only nodded and said,

"Honestly, I feel like Florence Nightingale, being in demand for these dramatic cases."

"Even the famous Florence had to keep up her strength," he told her with a smile that showed a flash of white teeth. "Bet you haven't had dinner. How about some energy-building food? We don't have a variety of restaurants, like your hometown of Portland does, but I know of a couple that are good."

"One will be enough." She smiled gratefully at him, suddenly realizing how hungry she was. "It sounds wonderful. First I must phone and cancel my plane reservation. Then give me a little while to freshen up. Okay?"

The little restaurant Quinn chose was clean and busy. It had a friendly staff who produced tasty, home-cooked meals and who seemed to know most of the patrons. Cory sat back and relaxed for the first time in hours.

"Like venison?" Quinn asked.

"I've eaten it so seldom I don't really know."

"They serve good venison here, if you'd like to try it."

Cory accepted his suggestion and later found the meat to be quite delicious and different. Thoughts of Charlotte's roast duckling crossed her mind. It seemed as if years had elapsed since this afternoon when she had been helping Charlotte in the kitchen.

She gave Quinn the details of the accident, not quite suppressing a shudder when she thought of how much more tragic it could have been. And while she was talking to this likable man sitting opposite her, Cory realized that his was her first date since she

had lost Paul Farron—longer ago then Tuesday. But she didn't feel free. Was it because Paul was forever on her mind? Deliberately she smothered her brooding thoughts. Come on, Hanson. Have the courtesy of giving your attention to the man you're with.

Quinn was outgoing and easy to talk to. No wonder he had lots of girl friends. He surprised Cory at one point by saying, "Seems to me the name Cora should go with another name, like Cora Sue or Cora Jane. You know, sort of quaint and old-fashioned. Your middle initial's *L,* isn't it? By any chance are you Cora Lee?"

Cory paused with her fork halfway to her mouth. "No, my middle name's Lorraine. But how did you know the initial?"

"Saw it on your luggage that first day." He looked at her and nodded. "Cora Lee suits you. I think that's what it should be."

Cory had to laugh. "Quaint and old-fashioned? Please! You cut me to the quick." Her luggage tags, of all things. He had a sharp eye and a good memory.

Before the meal was over he had unobtrusively disposed of Cory's new status with the phrase "Now that you're back in circulation" as he suggested a date next weekend.

She felt grateful for his matter-of-fact approach. Free and easy, Charlotte had said. Well, that suited Cory fine. The few hours with Quinn had given her a real lift.

Dr. Gozallis wanted her to start work as soon as possible, so before the stores closed Quinn directed her to one on Anderson Street, where she picked up a

couple of uniforms. The saleslady said, "You'll have a bigger selection if you order them by mail from Fairbanks."

"These will do, thanks. It's just short-term work." Cory also bought a few other necessary items, since she had rushed out that day unprepared for a move. Only through habit had she taken her purse, and now she was glad to have some money with her.

Back on the street, she had the good fortune to run into Buck Vego, the bush pilot who had been at the Swifts' party. When he said he was going to Datlow Springs the following morning, she gave him a hastily scribbled note for Charlotte, telling her what had transpired. Cory's suitcases were at the Swifts', and she asked the doctor's wife to please pack some of her personal things, which Buck promised to get to her as soon as he could.

On her way back to the hospital she paused for a moment at a street corner and glanced around at the unfamiliar surroundings. The town was bathed in the rays of the strange evening sun. She wouldn't be speeding southward tomorrow after all. Regret touched her briefly. She would like to get away, to be rid of everything that reminded her of Paul. But she was committed now to several weeks in Kovarik. Cory sighed. She would just have to make the best of it.

She entered the hospital and saw the secretary in a cubicle to the left. May was a pleasant auburn-haired woman who handled the switchboard and did clerical work. Despite a shortage of accommodations in town, she had succeeded in finding a room for Cory.

"Nothing fancy," May warned, "but it's small and clean and within walking distance of the hospital. I think you'll like Mrs. Webb. She's expecting you now."

Cory thanked her as she took the slip of paper and the address and street directions on it. Mrs. Webb's old house was easy to find, and Mrs. Webb looked like a kindly forest gnome. Her elderly face was lined and starred, like leather left out in the rain, and her eyes resembled black buttons that had faded and dimmed with time.

Cory felt at home right away. Mrs. Webb showed her the steamy little kitchen where she could fix meals for herself if she wished, and took her down the hall to show her the old-fashioned bathroom with its temperamental plumbing.

It was obvious that in Cory's honor the landlady had put some extra touches in the drab little room that was to be hers. One was the lavishly hand-embroidered pillow slip, bristling with loops and french knots hard as pebbles. When the woman had gone, Cory smiled and turned the pillow slip over so that she wouldn't awaken the next day with her cheek branded by the imprint of its floral sprays.

5

Early the next morning Cory reported for duty. Rose, a plump, garrulous nurse in her thirties, showed her around. Rose had short, straggly black hair with untidy bangs that, unfortunately, gave her the appearance of a disheveled crow. They looked in on the patients, including the Datlow Springs men, who were doing as well as could be expected. Charlie Egruk's injuries had proved to be the most serious of the trio.

Two new mothers occupied Maternity, and Cory heard the healthy squalling of their infants from the little nursery. There were a few surgical cases and several ambulatory medical patients. A man whom Rose said was there for observation dozed sonorously with his mouth open.

Later a diabetic man was brought in, barely conscious, and Cory went to work. She got an IV going as Dr. Gozallis ordered. He drew a blood sample and sent it to John in the lab, along with a urine specimen. John was an elderly lab technician whom the doctor had coaxed out of retirement a year ago.

"This patient neglected his insulin again," the doctor told Cory as he waited for the blood-sugar report.

"We have to get his diet and insulin dosage regulated."

Cory was busy during her entire shift, from the hernia repair case who had had surgery the previous day to the woman in a private room with a badly abscessed cut. This patient fretted because she didn't like being alone. "Time drags with no one to talk to."

As Cory gave her antibiotic pills she tried to explain about contagion. "While those bugs are still prevalent we have to keep you by yourself."

"You'd think I had leprosy," the woman sulked.

"Look how thoroughly I have to wash my hands after cleansing and dressing the wound," Cory said in a conciliatory tone. "So imagine the risk it would be to other patients if they handled anything in here. Cory picked up a couple of magazines. "Here," she offered cheerily. "Two brand-new issues your friend left for you."

The woman, mollified for the moment, began turning the pages.

Cory finished the shift with a man who was brought in doubled up in agony from a bad back. "Came on me all of a sudden," he groaned. "Don't know why. Didn't lift anything heavier than a pencil all day."

After immediate X-rays he was put on a hard mattress with a bed board and given muscle-relaxer medication.

"Muscle spasm," Dr. Gozallis said. "Use a steam pack on him, Cory. If there's no relief he'll have to go into traction."

That day flew, and the next. The work was so constant and demanding that Cory went straight to bed after she got home. She took one meal at the hospital, another out, and fixed only coffee or tea for herself at Mrs. Webb's.

The landlady knocked on her door several times during the first few days, always proferring a napkin-covered plate. "I baked today. Thought you'd like some of these with your tea."

"How thoughtful! Thank you."

With anticipation Cory would unveil a generous portion of dessert, but it didn't take her long to discover that the widow was a disastrous pastry chef. Her big flat cookies seemed to come in two varieties —scorched or pale and tasteless. Alone in her room, Cory choked down several, feeling akin to ancient sailors on rations of dry sea biscuits. She looked in despair at the rest. How could she safely get rid of them? She ended up by bringing them to work. When they had sat there untouched for several hours, she felt that she could throw them away in good conscience. To discourage the widow as time went on, Cory told her that she was cutting down on sweets.

Quinn phoned Cory at the hospital on Friday to set up a date, and she felt a thrill of pleasure at the sound of his voice. After work she made her way to Anderson Street with her dwindling supply of traveler's checks. It seemed like a good omen to find a dress that she liked at once. It was a softly draped acetate in a pale-as-new-leaves green.

On Saturday evening Quinn appeared at Mrs. Webb's still looking as if he belonged to the outdoors

despite his conventional clothes. At the uninhibited approval on his face Cory felt a quick flicker of gladness for the new dress, and she thanked him demurely when he complimented her on it. As they walked to his car she was conscious of his hidden tensile strength.

She told him about her work and her life at Mrs. Webb's while they drove to Dell's, a low, rambling building on the outskirts of town. Her eyes swept the landscape when she got out of the car.

"I can't get over it. Nine o'clock at night and the sun's still shining."

"It takes a while getting used to this land of the midnight sun."

Dell's consisted of a dance floor ringed by small round tables set against garishly decorated walls. Above the beat of canned music, Quinn introduced her to many people. He seemed to know everyone.

"This spot is not exactly the Starlight Roof," he remarked as they danced, "but you must admit it's congenial."

His dancing was passable, not smooth and fluid like Paul's, and Cory felt a sharp pang of regret for her lost love. "Yes, everyone's friendly," she said quietly. Are they sizing me up? she wondered. Quinn's latest acquisition, the jilted Oregonian? She began to feel self-conscious despite the becoming dress. She was tired from being up before six and on her feet all day. And her hair style had not turned out the way she wanted it to.

Since everyone at their table knew each other, the talk was mainly of local things. Cory soon became

aware of the way in which Quinn made sure that she was drawn into the conversation. She stole glances at him, marveling that a rough-and-tumble outdoor man should possess such sensitivity.

When they danced again she mentioned it to him. "Thanks for putting me at ease. For a while I felt that everyone was staring at me."

"They probably were. Just curiosity, I guess." His disconcertingly clear gray eyes looked into hers. "Some of them knew your boy friend—ex-boy friend. They said he used to come here when he was in town."

"Oh." All at once the evening went flat. Paul had danced here, had had fun with Roo here. After a moment Cory dragged her attention back. Was her spurt of moodiness so obvious that Quinn had noticed? He squeezed her hand, and his voice was low against her ear. "Forget him, Cora Lee."

She looked up at him, summoning a smile, remembering what Charlotte had told her about Quinn's girls. "Don't worry about me, Quinn." As they continued dancing it seemed to Cory that he held her closer.

All the way home Quinn's free-wheeling reputation filled her mind, and she braced herself for some sort of encounter. How should she handle it? What should she do? To her surprise Quinn drove her straight home, gripped her shoulders for a moment and kissed her once, firmly and quickly. Then he left her at Mrs. Webb's door.

Once inside the house, Cory was filled with a peculiar contradictory emotion, part relief, part disap-

pointment, that puzzled her the whole time she was getting ready for bed.

June slipped into July, and she settled into her temporary job with vigor. It was quite a different experience from working in a large city hospital. Here a nurse knew every patient, staff member, and employee.

There was only one person with whom Cory seemed to clash. Wilma was a drill sergeant type R.N. with hooded eyes and a domineering manner; she believed that no procedures were correct except hers.

They were busy all the time. New cases kept coming in, a premature baby, a stroke case, an injured worker flown in from Trask Valley. The sawmill accident victims were recovering satisfactorily. Two had been released to their homes, but Charlie Egnik still shuffled around the hospital on crutches. It was Dr. Gozallis's opinion that Charlie might never be able to do heavy logging work again. In addition to his broken leg, Charlie had suffered some ambiguous sort of back injury.

Cory began to work in the evenings, on the three-to-eleven shift. Good hours, she thought, that would give her time for some sightseeing before she left Alaska. But she found that by the time she awakened and took care of her personal needs, only a few hours remained in the middle of the day. That was not enough time to explore the rugged and beautiful area surrounding the town.

Once, on her day off, Dr. Gozallis invited her to dinner, a traditional gesture he made to each new

member of his staff. The doctor lived in an unpretentious old house that his wife had furnished with taste and imagination. She was a cordial woman lacking in genuine warmth, and Cory soon understood why Rose and some of the other nurses surreptitiously referred to her as "the cold fish." The Gozallises had a nineteen-year-old son who was a student at the University of Alaska; at present he was busy with summer courses. It was easy to see that he was their shining star.

"Is he going to be a doctor, too?" Cory asked.

"Physical therapist," the doctor told her.

The first time Cory had two consecutive days off she went to visit the Swifts, bringing little gifts of cigars and candy. It had rained the night before, and the countryside wore a scrubbed, glistening look. She found the doctor in the unusual position of resting—quite unwillingly, she soon discovered.

"A pack of nonsense," he fumed, shaking his busy head. "I feel as well as I ever did."

He was eager for news of the millworkers. "Big investigation of the sawmill by the industrial safety people," he told Cory, "and high time, too."

In the kitchen Charlotte confided, "He had another mild attack a few days ago." Her usually tranquil face was marred with concern. "Under the circumstances I think we should move to Kovarik before the winter. We should have done it before, but Nate wanted to hang on here. Hagen, the timber man, would give us a good price for our house." She looked around and sighed. "Lots of memories, but there comes a time when you have to make changes.

Maybe when Linda and her husband come to visit, they can talk him into it."

Cory put a hand on the woman's arm. "I hope everything will turn out well."

"Thanks, dear. Now"—she looked at Cory shrewdly—"how about you?"

"I like working at the hospital," she said, stroking Skookum as he sat on the floor looking up at her.

"Are you going to stay on?"

"For a short while."

"Have you seen Farron since the day he came here?"

Cory gently pulled Skookum's ear. "No."

"What you need is another man."

This was stated in such a profound tone that Cory had to laugh. She threw up her hands and said, "Ah, words of wisdom!" She was about to tell Charlotte that she had been out with Quinn, but she paused. The romantic-minded woman would be sure to attach significance to the casual date. They talked of other things instead, and after a while Cory offered to run some errands that needed to be done.

Soon, with the Swifts' thanks ringing in her ears, she took off in the pickup truck for Sam's house. She had the road to herself and breathed in the good, clean air. In the distance she could see a curve of the Oralo River, full and surging, and the outlines of the mill. The truck bumped along, splashing through puddles and sending mud splatters flying.

As well as medication for Sam, Nathan had included packages of tobacco and matches. Cory found Sam in good health and spirits, being well taken care

of by his wife, a plump, placid, part-Eskimo woman. Sam had recovered from his concussion very well. He was an old-timer who had been in the North since his youth and had tried his hand at many jobs. Datlow Springs was the place he had stayed in the longest; it was twelve years now, he told Cory, since he had settled down and married Annie. She was about ten years younger than he, and they seemed content in their cozy little home a few miles from town.

The small radio was on, and Sam patted it like a house pet. "We count on this litle critter. Two-way," he explained. "It's our communication system. Phone circuits wouldn't hold up through our winters."

Driving away a little later, Cory mused on the fast blossoming of her emotional involvement with people in the North. How quickly she had become like the rest of them, caring what happened to each other. Being city-suburban bred, she didn't know whether every small, remote place was so closely knit.

It seemed odd, too, that some of the activities on which she had once spent so much time—the theater, various other entertainments, shopping for clothes—had faded away almost without being noticed. She did miss the large libraries back home, and she missed music. The Swifts' records, although not to Cory's taste, were endurable. But the radio station that Mrs. Webb favored made Cory wince, and sometimes she longed for her own stereo and records and the occasional concerts she used to enjoy so much.

But if this area didn't have certain cultural and recreational facilities, it had many qualities to com-

pensate for their lack. Cory began to feel more and more as though she had no reason to hurry home.

She turned the pickup in the direction of the Egruk house. Charlie's wife was anxious to hear of his progress since she had no opportunity for frequent visits to Kovarik Hospital. Cory had brought ginger cookies for Betty and the other children, and they accepted them with glee.

"Where's Tommy?" she asked.

The oldest boy, David, pointed toward her feet. Cory saw a pair of dark eyes looking at her from under a chair, where Tommy had fled at her entrance. She held out a cookie but he wouldn't come out. His mother began to scold him, but Cory said, "It's all right." She put a handful of cookies on the chair, and Tommy shrank back like a little animal at bay. When she retreated he quickly snatched up the cookies.

A strange boy, she thought as she drove away. Retarded? Perhaps, to some degree. Or maybe he's just extremely shy.

On her way back Cory stopped in at the Lamonts'. She enjoyed Edie's friendly chatter and the way the children crowded around her. Debbie had a favorite doll to show her, and Susie a book.

"Luke will be home from the mill soon," Edie said.

Recalling the woman's innate femininity, Cory had brought her a little bottle of good-quality spray cologne from Kovarik. "I think you'll like this fragrance, Edie."

"Oh, Cory, thanks!" She sprayed a little on her wrist and sniffed it. "Yes, it's lovely!"

Cory felt pleased; she knew the cologne would not lie unopened in a drawer. Edie wouldn't wait for a special occasion to enjoy using it.

Cory had already had two cups of Annie's coffee, and nothing would do but that she must have another cup, and a crusty slice of wheat bread that Edie had taken from the oven only minutes before.

"Talk about good aromas! I knew I smelled baking when I came in." As she tasted it, with butter deliciously melting through it, Cory said in praise, "How do you do it with that wood-burning cookstove? Back home with the electric stove and all the timers and gadgets, my muffins and cakes were often a flop."

Edie smiled. "You get used to it. I understand that stove's moods as if it were a person."

Charlotte had said much the same thing, often referring to her stove as though it lived and breathed.

Luke came in then, and after having a cup of coffee, he showed Cory the work he had done on the house recently.

Later, as Edie walked with Cory to the truck, she asked, "Cory, have you made any future plans?"

The girl shook her head. "Just to go back home after a while." She kicked a clod of dirt and looked at Edie with a grin. "Charlotte would marry me off to someone here, if she could. Sort of on the rebound."

Edie said, half smiling but wholly serious, "You wouldn't need Charlotte or any other matchmaker.

Stick around Kovarik a while and you'll have your pick of men."

"You make me sound like Helen of Troy."

"Sometimes I think you don't realize how cute and attractive you are, to say nothing of having a nice personality."

"What a great press agent you'd be!" Cory laughed and turned on the ignition, a little embarrassed by the compliment. Cute and attractive? Not enough, alas, for Paul Farron.

6

Back in Kovarik the next day, Cory sent some postcards to her father, her brother, and a few friends, saying that she was staying on for a while. Not even to the closest of them could she bring herself to write of the broken engagement.

By keeping busy she hoped to drive Paul from her mind. She seldom succeeded. At sometime during the day or night his face would rise up before her, and her heart would silently cry, What happened to us—what went wrong?

Maybe she should take Charlotte's brusque advice: "Another man." But whom did she know here? Only Quinn. Since their dancing date that Saturday their paths had not crossed. If her evenings were free, would he have called her? Or had she failed to measure up to other girls he knew? She had been approached by a few men, one a jovial, lanky young fellow who delivered supplies to the hospital, the other an older owner-waiter of a small lunchroom she sometimes patronized. Neither of these men interested her as potential dates.

To Cory's surprise someone else sought her out, and it gave her sagging morale a boost. She came off

duty one night and saw a husky man with a well-tanned face by the desk. Leon Rand, her friend on the plane.

"Why, hello, Leon." It was too late for visiting hours. What was he doing here?

"Cory, I just heard you were working at the hospital. How about a ride home? I have a car—I always lease one when I'm here."

"Well, thank you," she said, pleased. It hadn't occurred to her that he had come to see her.

Apparently Leon had looked her up as soon as he knew she was living in town. Cory soon discovered that he had heard—who hadn't?—that the boy friend of the young nurse from Portland had married a different girl.

During the ride home Leon summed up such misadventures with a brief, philosophical "It happens," and Cory seemed to draw comfort from this practical attitude. They stopped for a snack at a little place off Anderson Street that stayed open late. Leon talked for a while about his work, then he posed the question that everyone seemed to ask: "How long do you plan to stay here?"

"I promised Dr. Gozallis a few weeks. I'm replacing Vivian, whose little son is still at home sick. It's taking longer than she expected before she can come back."

"While you're on this shift, why don't I run you home every night?"

"Are you sure it's convenient for you?"

"No trouble. I go out for coffee, anyway."

"Well, thanks, Leon. I'll appreciate that." She was flattered by his thoughtfulness and attention.

They sat on in the restaurant for a long while after their coffee cups had been filled and emptied several times. Leon's interest, his sympathetic face and listening ear, evoked in Cory a sense of comradeship. She found herself telling him, somewhat hesitantly, about the events leading to the trip North and its disappointing aftermath.

On the plane Leon had seen Cory's wide-eyed anticipation. He could contrast it now with the bruised, hurt look she wore, like that of a small injured woodland creature.

At length Cory stopped toying with the paper-napkin holder and combined a faint sigh with a smile. "Well, enough of that."

Perhaps her confidences caused Leon to open up, too. He began telling her a little about himself, including his loss last year.

"Jeanette was sick for a long time. It's hard to see someone young and vital failing right before your eyes." He looked down at his fingers, tracing small imaginary drawings on the table. "After it was over I kept to myself a lot." He shrugged. "Maybe that was a mistake. I don't know. Anyway, it's just lately that I've started going out again." He looked at Cory and a smile broke over his face. "You have no idea how friends try to marry off a single guy. It's like some sort of compulsion. Suddenly they all have maiden cousins or friends they drag out of the woodwork and throw at you."

Cory laughed, and he went on: "My own sister is the worst of all. There's this friend of hers, a widow with two mean kids. I like kids," Leon averred, "but this pair would even turn Santa Claus sour." He rolled his eyes and let out a long breath.

Cory smiled broadly. "So you were glad to escape to Alaska."

The waitress was hovering, anxious to clear their booth and go home, so they left.

Saying good-night, Cory felt happy to have someone around while she was in Kovarik. Better to go out for coffee with Leon then to languish and brood in her room.

But after the third or fourth time, Cory felt a ripple of worry about the intent expression on Leon's face when she caught him looking at her, the gradually increasing ardor of his good-night kiss. She reflected on his lonely state and the predatory Seattle widow. Was he determined to outwit the matchmakers and find someone on his own? While she was here she would prefer them to go on the way they were, as friends. But now that Cory was no longer promised to Paul, had Leon begun to think of her in a matrimonial way?

Time passed, and the Schaller baby boy, the little preemie, had gained sufficient weight to go home. Several normal deliveries had come and gone in OB. Cory's next big concern was Bobby, the pneumonia case in Pediatrics. The restless six-year-old had been through chest X-rays and other tests. His breathing was labored and his temperature high in spite of the

medication he had been given. She knew that he could go into convulsions if it soared.

Dr. Gozallis came in and moved about in his brisk way.

"He's had difficulty swallowing, Doctor."

"He needs fluids. Can't have him getting dehydrated. Get an IV started, Cory."

All evening she watched the child, encouraging him to sip fluids, holding his shoulders as he coughed up mucus, giving him the mild sedative the doctor had prescribed. He perspired freely, and she changed his linen often.

"Here, Bobby, this'll be more comfortable." She moved him in a semi-sitting, rather than a flat, position. When she had to leave the room, she made sure he could reach the light if he had to. Hours later, before she went off duty, Cory was relieved to see that his temperature was still down. She was pleased with Dr. Gozallis's methood of achieving this. He had ordered antibiotics, rectal suppositories, and a cool-water sponge. One doctor she knew had plunged his young patient into a tub of ice water, which had worked, but at a cost of shock and distress to the child.

A couple of days later Cory heard from Quinn. She had been more disappointed than she cared to admit when he hadn't called her, but was relieved to learn that he hadn't been avoiding her after all. He had been in another part of the state on business.

Quinn suggested a scenic car ride on her day off, which turned out to be one of bright sunshine. No

idea could have appealed to Cory more, and she asked Mrs. Webb to pack a lunch for them.

"Some sandwiches would be fine, please." She tried for tact in avoiding home-baked goods.

"Lucky I just made coffee cake," the widow said heedlessly.

Cory had reluctantly sampled this soggy confection into which its creator had tossed unrecognizable spices with a lavish hand. The cake always smacked of anise, and then again cardamon—or was it nutmeg? —and was so weighted down that it didn't rise an inch.

"No, thanks. He—doesn't care much for sweets," she temporized.

"Ah, too bad." Mrs. Webb was regretful. "Well, something hearty. Fried chicken, maybe."

"That would be great," Cory said in relief.

Within an hour and a half she was sitting happily beside Quinn as he drove out of town along the Oralo River. It was a green and gold day, and the vivid blue canopy overhead was flocked with clouds of spun sugar. At one point they came around a bend and Cory caught her breath. Before them lay a series of meadows carpeted with fireweed, looking like a velvety magenta rug that seemed to stretch for acres. After more than an hour of driving, they stopped to eat the appetizing dessertless lunch.

"This sure is a lovely spot," Cory said dreamily. They were sitting on a riverbank dotted with wild purple irises. In the distance was a chain of milky-green lakes.

When they had finished their lunch, Quinn took her hand and pulled her up.

"See that swampy marsh?" He pointed. "I saw a moose with her calf there one time." The water was thick with reeds and bright lilies, alive with the sight and sound of migratory wildfowl. "I used to go hunting when I first came here," Quinn told her. "Then I got so I hated to kill any living thing. Put my gun away for good, I guess."

Cory stole a glance at him. She had thought he was sensitive, but she had never seen this quality in his face before.

"I feel the same way when I see all the trophies around here," she admitted. "I'd rather have animals alive and free than hanging stuffed on a wall."

Later Quinn left the waterways and took a rutted road up the mountainside, pulling over to a wide shelf about halfway up. They got out of the car and walked to a spot from where they had a panoramic view of the serrated mountains, the silty glacial streams, and the forests of spruce and aspen.

Breaking a small silence that followed the exclamations on the splendid view, Quinn, still looking far off, asked, "How are you doing?" In regard to Paul Farron was what he meant.

Cory, too, looked into the distance. "Pretty well," she said. "It just takes time."

"I know." He nodded slowly, and she remembered that he had been through it, too.

"What now, Cora Lee? Still going back to Portland?"

"I think so."

He turned toward her. "You're not sure?"

She gave a little half-laugh. "I'm sure. There's nothing to keep me here now. As soon as I finish working for Dr. Gozallis and see the Swifts once more, I'll be on my way."

"Winters here are rough," Quinn said unexpectedly.

"Still, it must be pretty with all that snow." Cory gazed at the panaorama before them, and Quinn gazed at her.

"It's spectacular, but darned inconvenient at times. And it lasts so long."

"But I suppose people adapt to it."

He was still looking at her. "Some do, quite happily."

Cory crossed her arms, cupping her elbows and leaning forward as her eyes swept the landscape. "There's something about it here. Everything's so big and dramatic."

"It's different from anywhere else on earth," Quinn agreed.

"And the midnight sun, these long days when dusk never seems to come."

"In winter it's just the opposite. There's only a few hours of daylight then."

She smiled at him. "An upside-down land!"

"Talking about dramatic sights, you should see the northern lights, Cory. They're hard to describe. Different colors flashing all over, very shiny and luminous. It's a graceful sort of arc swinging lightly from one horizon to the other."

She drew her arms in tighter. "It sounds beautiful."

A look of intensity crossed his face and he moved forward, about to speak. But at the same moment Cory, unaware, let her arms drop and turned toward the car.

"Too bad I didn't have a camera with me today," she said. "I would've gotten some great shots."

Whatever had taken hold of Quinn was spoiled, and he followed her slowly to the car.

On the way back to town he was quiet. Cory gave him an oblique glance. He's probably tired, she thought; maybe he's been working hard lately.

In Kovarik, he parked the car and they walked along, talking little, looking idly in store windows.

"Would you like anything? A drink? Something to eat?"

Cory lightly patted her abdomen. "No, thanks. Still stuffed from Mama Webb's fried chicken." All at once her eyes fell on a car pulling up to the curb. She stiffened visibly and Quinn stared at her.

"What s the matter?"

It wasn't—it couldn't be Paul. Cory's heart backed down from her throat as her eyes fastened on several men emerging from a dusty car. "Oh, nothing," she said.

Quinn's gaze followed hers. He saw the Trask project sticker on the car and thought the men must have just come from the airstrip. Lines formed on his forehead as he noted Cory's heightened color and the alarm on her face.

When they reached Mrs. Webb's porch, Cory was

still trembling, and it angered her. If she ran into Paul Farron, so what? Why all this shivering and shaking over someone who meant nothing to her any more? Quinn obviously noticed it. Anybody would. She had to get out of Kovarik, away from chance meetings with her former fiance. The sooner the better, before she made a fool of herself.

"Well, so long, Quinn. Thanks for a nice drive," she mumbled, looking past him with unseeing eyes. The next thing Cory knew, her arms were being gripped in an iron vise, and a strong shake jolted her attention back to the moment.

Quinn's face was unsmiling and set, his eyes like chips of gray steel. "Loyal or not, you've got to get that guy out of your system!"

"I'm—trying," she whispered.

"Are you?" The steel chips seemed to bore into her. "Or do you wallow in brooding meditation over him every chance you get?"

He had hit home. Inwardly Cory flinched. Then she felt a flash of resentment—what right had this stranger, Quinn—but it flickered away at once and was replaced by odd gratitude for his concern. Suddenly she needed someone to be chivalrous and protective, someone to worry about her. She swayed forward a little, as though to move into his arms. But Quinn continued to hold her away from him, regarding her with that unwavering gaze.

Later, alone in her room, Cory pondered his behavior. Why did this man cause such paradoxical reactions in her? It seemed as though he had been about to give her a strong kiss. Then why hadn't he

done so? He had released her without so much as a routine peck. And it annoyed her that she felt somewhat cheated. Quinn certainly was not living up to the playboy image that Charlotte Swift had hinted at. Had the motherly woman warned Cory because she felt that Cory, as a lonely castoff girl, might be easy prey?

Oh, the heck with it, Cory thought wearily. Then a smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. It seemed that for the moment, at least, conjecture about Quinn had replaced—what had he called it?—a brooding meditation over Paul Ferron.

7

Cory stayed on the evening shift. She bypassed a chance to work days, letting a girl with a family have her dinnertime free. Odd hours didn't make that much difference to Cory.

Bobby, the pneumonia case, left the hospital after ten days, pale and shaky but well. The woman who had the abscess was gone, too. Their beds were soon occupied by others.

Cory grew friendly with Loretta, a licensed vocational nurse who worked part-time. She was happy to meet a young woman her own age. Loretta was a large, pleasant girl with big brown eyes and fair skin that freckled easily. Her husband was with the sheriff's office and had haphazard working hours, so she was glad of Cory's company on her days off to go to the movies and to come for dinner in their rented hillside bungalow.

The only sliver in Cory's flesh during this time was Wilma. It took all of the Hanson restraint to keep peace with this overbearing dictator, who had no actual authority except that in her own mind.

"Don't pay any attention to her," Loretta advised one day when a fray had ensued.

"She bothers you, too?"

"If I'd let her. You see, to Wilma I'm lower caste. She's constantly reminding me that I'm a mere L.P.N. No years of college, you know, like her."

"You mean she always gives you subtle little digs?"

"Subtle? Wilma's about as subtle as a Sherman tank," Loretta snorted, and Cory had to laugh.

Leon continued to bring Cory home each working night. On one hand she was glad, on the other apprehensive. He treated her with a sort of tender gallantry that worried her. Was he becoming serious?

She got her answer before July was out. With no more between them than a handful of dates and a few quick good-night kisses, Leon asked her to marry him. Edie Lamont's prophesy hadn't been so far off!

Despite her premonitions Cory's first reaction was one of surprise. "But Leon, we've known each other such a short time," she said haltingly, "and I'll be going away soon." She felt a faint ripple of dismay. Why couldn't things have stayed the way they were? But no, life didn't stand still.

Leon reached across the restaurant table and closed his hand over hers. "Don't leave yet, Cory. Give it a chance. I can tell you now that I was attracted to you from the start. But I don't expect you to say yes at once. Let's get to know each other better," he went on earnestly. "We have a lot in common. We've both been hurt, we've both lost someone. I'm sure we would be happy together. All I ask is that you think about it."

During the ensuing days Cory thought about it constantly. She was glad Leon didn't pressure her, be-

cause in her lost, empty state she was halfway tempted to accept the secure haven he offered. Yet she mustn't go from one mistaken engagement to another.

She lay awake each night long after she had gone to bed, trying to sort out her thoughts. Leon's tan, intent face would fill her imagination. She felt certain, as certain as one could, that his love would be a true one. If only there were some response stirring within her. Maybe, as he said, it would come in time.

She began to experience an odd tugging to stay in Alaska. For one thing, despite bossy Wilma, Cory had never found so much satisfaction in her work. From her former rommates in Portland she had heard that Charge Nurse Bullock was continuing at her tyrannical worst, and this news served to emphasize Cory's contentment here. But contrarily, at intervals the urge to leave would surface. Leave and go where? To Seattle, as Leon's wife? Cory wasn't sure. The emotional thrill she had felt for Paul had still not materialized for him.

One night Leon told her about his house in a Seattle suburb, near a lake. She wondered fleetingly what it would be like to live in a home furnished with another woman's treasures.

"You could change things, you know, to suit your own tastes," he said. "And she felt strangely touched at his perceptiveness.

She saw Charlotte Swift one day when she came to town. Cory debated whether to tell her of the proposal. She had told no one. Finally she did as they sat

in Mrs. Webb's living room over tea and a plateful of the landlady's inevitable little cementlike cakes. The doctor's wife did not seem surprised.

"Leon Rand's lonely, and you're a sweet, pretty girl."

"I know he's a good man." Cory fiddled with her teaspoon. "But I don't feel—you know—any big thrills."

"Like you did with Paul Farron?"

The girl nodded. "When Paul and I got engaged, I had known him a couple of months, about the same length of time I've known Leon. But with Paul, right from the start I was sort of—all atingle." She sat up straight. "Charlotte, does love have to occur at the beginning, or can it come later—can it grow?"

"Well, ours sure as heck came later. I couldn't stand Nate when we first met, and he didn't like me, either. We argued about everything! But you know, in time we found each other better company than anybody else. The arguments decreased and the attraction increased, and when he got transferred we missed each other terribly. We still have good, solid differences of opinion at times"—Charlotte's eyes twinkled—"but that only shows we've each kept our own individuality."

Cory had heard that love did not always happen at first sight as it had happened to her with Paul. It was reassuring to hear it again from this serenely happy woman. The feeling for Leon will come, she thought, and her mind began to dwell on what marriage to him would be like.

Leon faithfully kept their dates, and he never asked the direct question. For this Cory was relieved. As yet she had no answer for him.

Kovarik Hospital continued to be busy. One evening as Cory came on duty she heard Rose say to Loretta, "Guess what? Pete's back."

"Not again!"

"Pete? Is he a patient? What's wrong with him?" Cory asked.

"He has a well-known ailment in his elbow. Bends it too often." Rose, who was ready to leave, put on her jacket and walked down the hall with Cory. "Wait'll you see him." She shook her head mournfully and peered at Cory through her ragged black bangs. "Hard to believe he's only forty-two and was once so smart and handsome. A wonderful person when he's sober, which is less and less all the time."

To Cory's astonishment Rose suddenly braked to a quick stop and gave an exasperated sigh. Then she took off toward two unkempt men shuffling along the hall.

"No, you don't, fellows! No visitors. You ought to know that by now." Over their mumbled protests she herded them outside.

"A few of Pete's drinking buddies," she explained to Cory. "We'd never succeed in drying him out with them around."

In the days that followed Cory's heart went out to the man. He was quiet and chastened, with his starkly lined face and hunted eyes giving mute testimony to the struggle he waged inside himself.

Cory was at the nurses' station one evening when Loretta burst in with her eyes popping.

"Cory, come quick! I was just in Eight and I think he's dead!"

Pete? But he had been bright and well that day despite his severe liver damage. Cory's heart pounded as she rushed to his room. Pete was slumped face down, ominously still. As Cory bent over him Loretta lingered hesitantly at the doorway. "Is he—?"

Cory straightened up. "Dead drunk."

Loretta came forward slowly and Cory said, "Can't you smell it? Good Lord, it's like a distillery in here!" She unearthed an empty bourbon bottle from beneath the covers.

"Where'd he get it?" Loretta gasped.

Later, after Pete had been attended to, Cory asked Dr. Gozallis the same question. "His friends haven't been in," she said in a worried tone. "We've been right here. I don't know how he could have—"

"Cory." The doctor held out the empty bottle by its neck. "A person who's systematically digging his own grave with this kind of thing becomes quite desperate and crafty. Don't blame yourself. There are lots of people in and out of here. Pete probably bribed somebody. The person may even have thought he was doing the poor guy a favor."

"Will this set him back very much?"

Dr. Gozallis put down the bottle. "Yes, every fifth is costing him plenty now." His deep voice was heavy with regret. "We'll do the best we can and try to get him to go to A.A. again when he gets out."

A few days later Cory had to work the day shift,

from seven to three. To her chagrin she found Wilma stamping around, issuing orders like a storm trooper. She determined not to let the woman vex her and began busying herself with her routine.

There was a new patient in Room Four, a two-year-old boy named Kenny, who had come in with a croupy cough and difficulty in breathing. When Cory looked in on him he appeared to be sleeping restfully.

Cory moved on. She liked Maternity. Joy seemed to bloom there, rather than the hushed sadness often found in other wards. Visitors were cheerfully coming and going; gifts were being opened and admired; good-byes were said to people who had come in as a couple and left as a family.

She lingered in the nursery, absorbing the miracle of the second pair of twins in her nursing experience, a healthy boy and girl weighing over five pounds each. Their little faces were pink and perfect, like half-opened rosebuds, their fists like tiny translucent seashells.

She went on to other patients, spending some extra time with the hollow-eyed Pete.

By the time Cory got back to Kenny, a good while had elapsed, but she figured it was all right because Wilma was on the floor, too. She entered Four for a routine check and bent over the bed, stiffening suddenly. Something was different about him, she didn't know exactly what. She watched the boy intently for a few moments, took his pulse, and gazed in perplexity at his chart. It told her nothing.

She rushed out, looking for the other nurse.

"Maybe Dr. Gozallis needed her momentarily in the clinic," the secretary offered as a guess.

Cory was on her way there when Wilma materialized leisurely from the diet kitchen with a cup of coffee.

"The baby in Four," Cory said breathlessly. "I think the doctor should take a look at him."

"Why? What's wrong?" The hooded eyes were challenging and hostile.

"I don't know, but he looks funny."

"What do you mean, funny? I was just in there and he looked all right to me." Wilma set her thick legs in a firm stance, as though bracing herself against an attack.

"Well, look at him now. You'll notice a change."

"His temperature?"

"The same. I can't explain it," Cory faltered, "but something's different there. I think the doctor should see him."

"You haven't been here long," Wilma said loftily, "or you'd know that nobody disturbs Dr. Gozallis during clinic hours."

It was like arguing with a mule. Cory brushed past her toward the clinic. The nurse swerved adroitly around her.

"Before you go bothering the doctor, I'll show you that the patient's all right.'

They both entered Room Four and looked at the boy. "See?" said Wilma. "He's okay. Anyway, the doctor will be making his rounds soon."

Cory continued peering at him in a distraught way. Why couldn't Wilma discern the almost imperceptible change?

"No, he's different somehow. He seems to have a harder time breathing."

"He does not. What's the matter with you? His vital signs are stable. Everything's okay." Wilma's face became mottled as her irritation deepened to anger. "You graduated only a year or so ago, and you think you know more than somebody who's been nursing for eight years."

Cory thought it was ridiculous that they were standing here arguing while something was happening to the patient. She strode resolutely past the other nurse.

"We're supposed to handle the ward, not go running after the doctor for every little thing," Wilma called out after her.

That's your rule, not his, Cory surmised. She left Wilma red-faced and muttering in the hall. The outpatient clinic was packed to the nines, with Dr. Gozallis immersed in the midst of it. Cory felt a nip of doubt at deflecting him from these cases. Her worry about Kenny had such an unsubstantial foundation, yet she knew she had to interrupt him.

"It's the little boy in Four," she told him in a low tone.

"Yes?" He paused in what he was doing and looked at her through his owl-like glasses.

"Nothing conclusive." Cory twisted her hands together. "But he looks different to me." Oh, please

don't ask me to specify, she thought in despair; just come!

The doctor said something to the man he had been examining. Then he was out the door and hastening down the hall. Cory had to practically run to keep up with his long-legged strides. Wilma was lingering nearby, and she came forward with an air of righteousness, opening her mouth to speak. She's going to absolve herself from any blame for this foolish interruption, Cory thought. But before Wilma had a chance to say anything, Dr. Gozallis swept into Room Four.

Afterward Cory would always remember the frantic bustle that then took place.

The youngster turned out to have a respiratory obstruction. He couldn't breathe and was turning cyanotic. Right then and there the doctor performed a tracheotomy to establish an airway. With Cory assisting and Wilma holding the child, he made an incision, enlarged the opening, and insterted a metal tube. At once air rushed out through the tube, and Kenny began to breath more easily. Slowly the bluish color subsided from his face. Later Cory stayed with him through the critical period to check respiration and perform other necessary procedures.

She would never forget how, after the little patient was breathing safely, Dr. Gozallis had turned to her and Wilma for a moment.

"That's the hallmark of a good nurse, what you girls showed today." His voice was grateful, his eyes warm as he gazed from one to the other. "Not just

what you learn in books, but something beyond that —feelings, perceptions, instinct."

It was all Cory could do not to turn and look at Wilma. She wondered if the woman had the grace to blush.

8

"Guess what?" Rose asked Cory one day. "We're all invited to the doctor's Wednesday night at seven. You'll be hearing about it. The evening shift's supposed to drop in after work."

"What's the occasion?"

"Who knows or cares? Never question a free buffet dinner."

Cory had no more time to talk as her attention was taken up by a middle-aged surgical patient who had just come from the office. He gave her his admission paper and she led him to the lab and X-ray.

"Do you know about your pre-op lab work, Mr. Vane?" she asked as she took his small suitcase.

He nodded. "I'm getting used to all this. Last week I came in and they found some stones, which they said were the cause of my trouble."

"Yes, you had the gall bladder series then. Now you'll have an EKG, chest X-ray, urinalysis, CBC—"

"Sounds like the whole alphabet!"

At least he was in good spirits. "We have to type and cross-match for two units of whole blood," Cory explained. "Sounds complex, but it all goes pretty fast. This is John Ballinger, our lab technician."

Dr. Gozallis saw the patient during the afternoon. He explained the procedure for the operation and asked numerous questions about the man's physical history. Later the anesthetist checked him out for allergies and lung disease to determine which anesthetic would be given. Before Cory went home she prepared the abdominal area for surgery.

Early the next morning she was back in the patient's room. He had slept soundly, thanks to the medication he had been given at bedtime. Although he was understandably nervous, he was calm and cooperative.

"We'll get you ready now, Mr. Vane, and before you know it your surgery will be over. You have to take off your ring, please. And leave your dentures out. You don't wear contact lenses, do you? Okay." She showed him the nasogastric tube. "I have to put this in your nose, and it will go down to your stomach. If you relax as well as you can, it will be less uncomfortable. Take some deep breaths through your mouth—only when I tell you to—and swallow a little water through this straw. There—good. You're doing fine."

He was given preop medication by a hypo and then was wheeled into Surgery on the gurney. After preparation by the anesthetist, Dr. Gozallis proceeded to operate. Cory circulated and a technician scrubbed. He was an on-call technician who always assisted the doctor for major surgery. The operation was carried out smoothly without any complications, and the patient withstood the procedure well.

Back in his room with him, Cory took his vital

signs every ten minutes. She watched his breathing and, when necessary, suctioned out mucus with a suction catheter. When the patient regained consciousness, the airway came out automatically and he began moaning and moving around. Later Cory administered a pain-killer injection. His vital signs were stable, and from then on she only had to take them every half hour.

The man's anxious wife hovered nearby, and Cory found that she needed more comforting than the patient, who had dozed off.

"Are you sure he's all right?" the woman asked. Her fists were pressed to her mouth, and her eyes gazed fearfully on the prone form in bed. "He looks so awful."

Cory realized that to someone unaccustomed to postoperative appearances, the heavily breathing figure strung up with tubes could present a frightening aspect. She reassured the woman that all was going well. "When you come back next time, you'll see him looking more like his old self."

Wednesday came, and Loretta and her husband drove Cory over to the Gozallises' buffet dinner. They found most of the hospital personnel already there, with Wilma putting on a gushing social veneer. Cory gazed around the doctor's house with admiration.

"Your home is lovely," she told Mrs. Gozallis shyly. The doctor's wife was seeing to everything like a good hostess, but somehow Cory didn't feel comfortable with her.

"Thank you, my dear." After a few pleasantries she moved on, and Cory gazed after her.

Mrs. Gozallis mixed courteously with everyone, and there was no denying the effort she had put into the splendid buffet. Still, Cory had the feeling that the party had been the doctor's idea, to which his wife had eventually agreed and at whose end she would probably sigh with relief. Cory's feeling had no solid base, yet she sensed some definite lack, an absence, perhaps, of wholeheartedness. Maybe Mrs. Gozallis was out of her element in Kovarik. Maybe she found the place sterile without art museums and opera.

This theory was blasted when Cory overheard John asking her about her recent backpack trip. It turned out that Mrs. Gozallis was a skilled horsewoman and a crack shot, and excelled in fishing and winter sports.

Cory felt a sudden rush of shame at taking the woman apart while accepting her hospitality. Why am I analyzing their marriage from the sidelines like this, anyway? she asked herself. At times she had caught herself examining the Swifts' marriage, too. Was this preoccupation with long-wed couples connected with the decision she had to make about Leon? Once she took the plunge, she certainly wanted it to last.

There was little about the Swifts to ponder on. They complemented each other like sugar and cream. But the Gozallises seemed different from each other in temperament and manner. Yet there they were, apparently happy and getting along fine.

Who do you think you are—Dr. Freud? Cory gave

herself a mental shake and concentrated on enjoying the evening.

Several times she went with Leon to another house in which she also began to feel ill at ease. This was the home of his friends, Pat and Roger. She soon learned that the couple, before moving to Kovarik, had known Leon and his late wife in Seattle. There was no doubt that Leon had told them he was serious about Cory.

When he first introduced her with a sort of bashful pride, she had the uncharitable thought that he was displaying her like a trophy. See? I told you. Look at the nice girl I found.

The people were warm and friendly, but Cory couldn't stifle the feeling that she was being quietly appraised and compared to the dead Jeanette. The fact that she seemed to measure up and be accepted gave her no satisfaction.

Roger had a prematurely receding hairline that gave him a shiny-faced, cherubic look. As he mixed drinks he cracked gentle jokes about Leon, which Cory knew were for her benefit. His wife, Pat, was small and wiry with sharp little features softened by a merry expression. She kept saying, "Now, Roge, stop it or you'll have Cory believing you!"

Under other circumstances the girl would have enjoyed the good meals and congenial talk. But she was conscious every minute of the role she played in their minds, that of Jeanette's successor, which in her own mind was anything but certain. To her this gave the cozy domesticity a false air.

On a gray drizzly morning during the following week Cory left her room before eleven o'clock to shop for some things she needed. She barely escaped Mrs. Webb, who had the coffee on and was assiduously shaking an ominous-looking batch of misshapen muffins from their pan.

The first person Cory met on the street was Quinn, who had been away again for a while. "Cora Lee, this is lucky!" He clasped her hands, greeting her like someone long lost, and they ducked into a doorway out of the rain.

She found herself inordinately glad about the chance meeting. Like quicksilver a thought sped through her mind: he attracts me more than Leon does. She tried to shake the thought away as being disloyal to Leon. Quinn, after all, was only a friend, while Leon had offered to pledge his life to her.

"Are you on your way to work now?" he asked.

"No, I'm shopping."

"Could we have lunch together in about an hour and a half at Andy's?"

"That would be nice," Cory said.

"Okay. I have some business to attend to now. See you later."

Probably his business was with a girl, Cory thought dryly. To her surprise she felt a little stir of something that resembled jealousy

She made her purchases and then browsed through several stores on Anderson Street. She bought two small furry bears for her little nephews, and had them sent air mail. It was too early to meet Quinn, so

she took her time walking around. The office where Leon did his business was nearby, and for a moment thought she should go in and say hello. But the fact that she was meeting Quinn made it seem awkward, and she let it go. I hope Leon doesn't run into us, she said to herself, and at once she became annoyed. Why shouldn't she lunch with whomever she pleased? She had no definite ties with Leon Rand. Oh, Lord, why this sudden defensiveness?

To kill time, she entered a variety store and strolled around. She was absently examining a trayful of little carved totem poles when she looked up and unexpectedly saw a familiar face. Her breath caught in a small silent gasp.

The tumbled dark hair and pretty profile of Roo Ellman was directly in front of her. The girl was waiting on a customer. Cory dropped the small souvenir as if it had burned her, and made her way quickly out of the store. Her heart beat like a tiny caged animal against her ribs as she hurried down the street and entered a lunch shop, which was almost empty on this late rainy morning. She sat there panting like an aging dog. Had Roo seen her? Why had she fled like that? Because she couldn't bear to be around that girl, who was Paul's wife.

She had ordered coffee, which she couldn't drink, and was staring into the cup when Roo entered breathlessly and looked around the shop. Cory jerked her head up in amazement. What did Roo want? she wondered in a near panic.

Roo came over and sat on a stool next to Cory. "I

wish you'd waited. I wanted to talk to you." Roo put her arms on the counter and leaned forward. "Nothing, thanks," she said to the approaching waitress.

Cory struggled for a calm she was far from feeling, saying coldly, "I don't think we have anything to talk about."

Roo irritated her by guessing what was in her mind. "You don't have to worry. He's not here."

Of course Paul would be far away, working in Trask Valley. "I'm meeting someone," Cory said, and half rose. "I have to go."

"Listen, I was waiting to get hold of you to tell you this. Now's as good a time as any. But I have to hurry. I'm on my break."

In spite of herself, Cory couldn't contain her curiosity. She settled back on the stool.

"Paul's gone," Roo said, "and I mean *gone*. Shortest marriage on record." Her mouth twisted wryly. "It's being annulled right now."

Cory's heart missed a beat. Her eyes were like saucers as she stared at Roo. "You mean—you've—split up?"

"Like atoms." Roo tapped her fingers on the counter and gazed off into space. "I'll level with you. It's only fair I should. Paul and I—well, for over four months we had a good thing going. He never said anything about being engaged to a girl back home." She shrugged and stared for a moment into Cory's face. "It wouldn't have made any difference if he had told me. Of all the guys I've known, none got to me like Paul Farron. I really fell for him. Then that

night at Doc Swift's I met you, Paul's girl, coming looking for him because he never wrote. And I thought how lucky I was that I was working for my uncle then and heard about it so I could take steps of my own."

Again she looked at Cory with defiant eyes. "You would've done the same thing. Any woman in love would. I went straight to Paul and planted the idea of a quick marriage. He was getting some time off, he was lonely and in a loving mood—anyway, he agreed." Her gaze became brooding. "It might've worked out all right. I thought you'd go back to where you came from. Then that lousy letter of yours caught up with him. When he found out later that I was in Datlow Springs at the same time and knew about you, that was it. Talk about a fight!" She twisted her hands together. "Right after that he filed for an annulment." Her smile was mirthless. "You're probably thinking how could I have any luck, I got what I deserved."

Cory hardly knew what to say. She stared at Roo and realized that the girl looked very tired and drawn. She sat hunched on the stool with an air of defeat.

"What are you going to do now?" Cory asked hesitantly. In thinking about it later it surprised her that her first thought had been for the girl, not for Paul.

Roo sat up straighter. "Well, I got that job in the store. When I get enough money for the plane fare, I'm going Outside, probably to California. I always wanted to see it." She waved a hand around. "Next

winter, when everybody's toes are frozen here, I'll be lying on a beach in San Diego or somewhere soaking up sunshine."

"But just one fight," Cory ventured. "Every newlywed couple has that. Maybe you'll—get together again."

Roo shook her head. "Not a chance. Well, I have to get back." She stood up. "I was surprised to hear you were still around. Thought you would've gone home by now."

Cory's hand made a negligible movement. "I find it very different in Alaska. I'm enjoying it."

Roo's look was puzzled. "In spite of everything?"

"Yes." Cory gave her a frank gaze. "Yes, I've met some wonderful people."

"Look, I'm sorry—about everything." She shifted from one foot to the other. "Well, I guess he's all yours again."

"You think I'd take him back just like that?" Cory cried.

Roo shrugged. "No hard feelings?"

Cory shook her head. The next moment the girl was gone, and Cory sat on, gazing at the cooling coffee, steadying her racing thoughts as she tried to assimilate Roo's news. So the girl had manipulated Paul into marrying her before Cory could reach him. But if he married Roo, regardless of the circumstances, he must have had some feeling for her in the first place. How could he call the marriage quits before it had barely begun? Was his anger that deep at Roo's ploy? Or had he felt regret and renewed love for Cory after seeing her briefly at Dr. Swift's that

day? She pushed her cup away and got up, thinking angrily, What is it to me, anyway?

She walked slowly toward the restaurant to meet Quinn. They were halfway through the meal before she told him about Roo, and only then because he remarked on her preoccupation.

Quinn gave a low whistle on hearing the news. "That was short and sweet!" He looked searchingly at Cory.

Not so sweet, she thought. Aloud she said, "Roo intends to go to California to live, so it doesn't look as though they'll have a reconciliation."

She didn't feel like enlarging on the subject, so no more was said.

From then on, by avoiding the variety store, Cory saw nothing of Roo. But the breakup of the marriage filled her mind for days. It especially affected her thoughts of Leon. Should she accept him and show Paul how good a marriage could be? No. To prove something to another man was a very poor reason to marry.

She would accept Leon because now she realized he was what Paul Farron was not—considerate, dependable, devoted. Deep down she was not satisfied with this line of thought, either. Shouldn't you marry a person for only one reason—because you loved him? Everything else was secondary. Cory knew in her heart that, while she liked and respected Leon Rand, she didn't love him, and she wasn't sure if she ever could.

9

The following week Cory traded shifts with a married girl who needed to be home for a few days between seven and three. Cory told Leon of the change, and he said he would phone her later in the week to find out when to resume calling for her.

These daytime hours were busier than the evening shift because of the added ebb and flow of the active clinic, but it wasn't the work that left Cory drained. The second day turned out to be one of the most harrowing she had experienced since becoming a nurse.

She emerged slowly from the hospital in midafternoon with a coldness seeping through her that the bright sunshine did not dispel. Death—she had encountered it before, and as a professional she should have developed a certain detachment to it. But it seemed to hit harder here than in the large impersonal institutions.

She drew her thick white sweater more closely around her as she turned into the main street. Not even three-thirty yet. She couldn't go and sit in that little room at Mrs. Webb's. The walls would close in on her during the long hours ahead.

These are the times when a person needs some-

body, Cory thought, when your spirits are low and you can't shake off the gloom. She wished she were near the Swifts or Edie Lamont. Well, the next best thing was a place, any place, where there were people, where you didn't have to be alone. She turned automatically toward a lunch counter.

Then she saw the agricultural office down the street. Someone you could talk to was better than someone who who was merely there, and she hadn't seen Quinn since their lunch date. In a few moments her steps brought her to his office. She must have looked as bad as she felt, for he jumped up at once and hurried toward her.

"Cory! What's the matter?"

She gave a brief glance around and was relieved to see that he was alone. "Oh, Quinn, it's been the most terrible day." She was unable to keep the tremble out of her voice. "I'm sorry to bother you, but I couldn't face being alone all evening."

He peered anxiously into her face. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, it's just—" She gave a shaky laugh that didn't come off. "Oh, I feel emotional and blue—" Her voice broke and she turned her face aside. Tears had been near the surface all day, and now she tried to blink them away.

Quinn tactfully busied himself around the desk. "Look, I'm about through here, anyway. Come to my place. You look as if you could stand a shot of brandy."

"Well, maybe some coffee," Cory said wanly. She thought in a rush of gratitude, I'll always remember

that he didn't say I was silly and laugh it off, that without even knowing what it was about, he seemed to understand.

Quinn had a small untidy apartment in a four-unit building a few blocks away. If Cory's mind had been clearer, she would have concluded that, despite the cleaning lady who came in, it lacked a woman's touch. Coats and jackets were draped on chair backs. Coffee mugs sprouted like buds atop every flat surface. Several days' newspapers layered the sofa. The furniture was worn, comfortable, functional. Decorative items such as house plants, pictures, or cushions had not found their way here. But to her it was a welcome sanctuary. Quinn shoved away the papers so that they could sit down. Over the little glass of brandy he gave her, she told him haltingly of the losses of the day.

"When I got there this morning everybody was talking about Pete."

His eyes opened wider. "Pete Barbos? What happened to him?"

She looked down at the glass, turning it around in her fingers. "He was found dead in his hotel room late yesterday. He'd been there for some time—" Cory's voice cracked. "Oh, I know he was a hopeless drunk and all that, but he was such a likable person—"

Quinn reached over and touched her hand. "Yes, he was a nice guy." His eyes were far away. "When I first came here Pete wasn't in such bad shape." He gave a deep sigh. "Poor guy."

"There'll be an autopsy and everything. He had

cirrhosis, of course, but we had hoped—" She looked at Quinn. "Dying all alone like that—I mean, it's so sad and lonely. . . ." Cory's words trailed away, and Quinn nodded in sympathy.

"Then the Emlich baby." She took a long shuddering breath. "I don't know if you know them. They're from somewhere way out of town. Married late. She had a miscarriage before. The thing is"—she looked at him in despair—"they wanted this baby so much! She was so happy to go the full term, and the labor seemed fine. Then she delivered a perfect-looking boy, but—stillborn." Cory's eyes were shadowed with the painful memory. "She's thirty-eight years old. I heard her husband trying to console her, talking about adoption. And she was so quiet, like stone, the kind of calmness that's worse than hysteria."

Quinn took Cory's free hand and talked to her, and she slowly sipped the brandy. But the desolate feeling did not go away.

"Oh, Quinn, I know, but today everything just piled up. One tragedy on top of another." She set down the small glass. "This other woman, she's only thirty. She had a tumor removed less than two years ago. Well, she's back again, and—" Her voice broke, then continued, "Dr. Gozallis had to tell her husband —it's malignant and widespread." Quinn held her hands tightly and she looked up into his face. "They have two children—"

Her eyes brimmed over, and she pulled her hands away and covered her face. She began to cry noisily, with ugly tearing sounds that she couldn't control. Quinn put his arms around her and muffled the sobs

against his chest. Cory was dimly aware of the smooth texture of his shirt against her face, of the masculine aroma of shaving soap.

After a few moments the tears, which had been gathering for hours, spent themselves. Embarrassed, she dabbed at her eyes. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be." He still held her close.

"I didn't mean to fall apart like this."

"Cory, Cory!" With one hand he tilted her chin up so that they were facing each other.

Oh, Lord, I look so red-eyed and horrible, she thought, not meeting his gaze.

Quinn's fingers rubbed her tear-stained cheek, and his voice was very low. "Never change, Cora Lee. Stay this way. Involved, loving, caring about people."

Slowly she raised her eyes, and in the next moment Quinn's lips were on hers. Never had anything seemed so right and natural. Had the unaccustomed thimbleful of brandy given her this glow, this warmth flowing through her?

He kissed her a second time, and after a pause, again. For a few moments Cory was conscious only of the pressure of his arms, his mouth. Then Quinn slowly released her and smoothed her hair with a gentle touch.

"It's been a rough day for you, hasn't it? What do you say we go out for an early dinner?"

Cory surfaced from her hazy depths. A restaurant —noise, voices, people, and she with her pink-rimmed eyes. It didn't sound appealing. "Suppose I fix dinner here? Have you got anything to cook?"

"Would you?" He seemed surprised and pleased.

The small refrigerator revealed bacon and eggs. "I make a good omelet," Cory said.

"No, let's get some things, okay?"

Cory hid her puffy eyes behind sunglasses and they started off, like children on a happy errand. They bought salmon, large baking potatoes, and a bag of fresh mixed vegetables. In the flurry of shopping the girl felt her blue mood lifting.

"There's coffee at your place, isn't there?" She looked around the store shelves.

"Yes. Let's get some dessert for our sweet tooths."

"You mean teeth."

"Teeth, tooths." They smiled, enjoying each other. "An old lady runs a bakery down this way. She's got good pies." Quinn steered her along the street to the shop, a small and unpretentious one with gallon-size cans of sliced apples, peaches, and other fruit stacked up in the back. They bought dinner rolls and an apple pie and later picked up a pint of vanilla ice cream.

Walking beside Quinn with their purchases, Cory suddenly thought of Leon and what his reaction would be to her visiting another man's apartment and fixing a cozy dinner for two. For that matter, why had she gone running to Quinn today and not Leon? Well, Quinn's office was right there— She choked off the mental excuses. She was a free and unattached woman who owed explanations to no one.

She felt strange but not ill at ease as she moved around Quinn's unfamiliar cluttered little kitchen. There were no pressures here as with Leon. She was just a girl friend to Quinn, and this fact made her

more comfortable. She tied a dishtowel as an apron around her uniform and began to scrub the potatoes. Then they went into the oven to bake, along with the piece of salmon. Quinn cleared off the tiny table and mixed the drinks, and their talk was easy and natural.

"Take a look and see if you think the fish is done," Cory said, peering into the oven.

As Quinn bent down, the thought flitted through Cory's mind that she was probably far from being the first girl in his apartment. And how he had kissed her, too, in a tender but experienced way. Yet she felt no qualms about being alone with him.

"Just right." He removed the salmon to the heated plate she produced. Then he went to put a record on his portable machine.

To Cory's relief the food was perfectly cooked, and she found a great satisfaction in observing Quinn's hearty appetite.

"This is terrific, Cory! I get so tired of restaurants."

"Do you cook much for yourself?"

"Light meals sometimes, but I usually eat out."

Perhaps because of its somber beginning, the evening was muted and low-key. Cory washed the few dishes, and they brought their second cups of coffee to the living room.

"You read a lot," she said, browsing among scattered stacks of books on history, philosophy, the environment. Along with some recent fiction, she noticed Hemingway and Fitzgerald.

He showed her a special shelf. "Mysteries."

Her eye ran over titles and authors. "So you're a Hammett and Chandler buff."

"There's no one quite like those early private eyes."

"Do you pick up your books in Fairbanks? The bookstore here doesn't have much of a selection."

"But they can order anything you want. I belong to book clubs, too." Quinn held up a record album. "And record clubs."

"I see you've a lot of good albums." She told him about the records she had accumulated, and realized that some of their tastes ran along similar lines. If I stay a while, I should have my things shipped here, she thought. Wonder if it costs a lot?

"You can borrow any of the books you like," Quinn offered. After some contemplation she chose two suspense novels and a history of the Yukon gold rush.

They sat for a long time over their coffee, and then Cory made some more. When the second pot was empty, she looked at her watch.

"I'd better get home before Mrs. Webb has the state police out looking for me. She's worse than a den mother."

"Want a ride, or do you feel like walking?"

"Let's walk." She picked up her sweater and the books. They stepped out into the mild summer night and she took his arm. "Thanks for putting up with me today, Quinn."

"Everybody needs cheering up at some time or other. And don't forget, I enjoyed the evening, too." He looked at her. "Feeling better?"

She nodded. "The sorrow, or whatever you want to call it, is still there, but I think I can face it more realistically now."

They were almost at Mrs. Webb's house when he said, "It's probably none of my business, but do you think you'll be going to Seattle later on—with Leon Rand?"

Cory shot him a quick look. Had Leon spread word of his proposal around? "I'm not sure yet."

Quinn had caught her look and read it accurately. "Charlotte Swift told me. I ran into her the other day."

"Oh—Charlotte." Cory looked straight ahead and repeated, "I'm not sure."

"Farron's still in your blood, isn't he?"

She gave a start, and Quinn squeezed her arm in a contrite way. "Sorry. Out of line. It *is* none of my business."

At the front door he kissed her lightly and said, "Thanks for fixing the gourmet meal."

When she went inside, her personal thoughts soon were dissolved as the grief of the day streamed back. How quiet it was. A feeling of sadness seemed to permeate her small room. Cory went quickly to bed, thinking how glad she was that she hadn't come home hours ago.

10

A small personal emergency a few days later gave Cory a little time off. She was to report for her evening shift two hours later than usual. For several days she had suffered with a toothache, and, while the pain was not excruciating, a dull, steady ache made her jaw throb.

"Better go to the dentist," Rose advised.

Fortified by an occasional pain killer, Cory kept hoping the ache would go away. When it didn't she took Rose's advice, made an appointment, and headed for the lone, overworked dentist in town. Better to get it over with before she went to Datlow Springs for another of her short visits with the Swifts.

Walking toward the dentist's office, Cory noticed a blonde woman in her late twenties coming out of a lunchroom carrying several paper cups. Cory knew her name was Dorothy, that she was a divorcee with a preschool child, and that she was a public stenographer who did work for Leon Rand, among others. Cory wondered idly if one of the cups was for Leon's afternoon coffee break.

In thinking of Leon, she felt the usual warmth toward him and reflected dryly that warmth and friendship were hardly enough for a lifelong marriage. With Leon she never experienced the thumping heart or the delicious shivers that Paul Farron's presence used to evoke.

Lately there had been a new urgency about Leon that was unsettling. He didn't verbally ask for an answer to his proposal, but the question was there, blatant in his eyes. The atmosphere at Roger and Pat's had also become increasingly familiar, and Cory knew that she was now taken for granted as Leon's wife-to-be.

Why couldn't she know in her own mind one way or the other? As she sat in the dentist's waiting room with an unread magazine in her hands, she thought, I shouldn't compare Leon's case with Paul's. I was green and impressionable when I met Paul. No wonder he swept me off my feet. Can't I settle for a quieter, more mature relationship with Leon Rand? Why do I want all the romantic feelings, the bells ringing, a nightingale's song? It's not fair to keep the man dangling. I *must* make a decision soon.

Cory's turn came. To her relief the filling proved to be uncomplicated and she was out of the chair in no time. Glancing at her watch, she saw that she would have time to pick up a little gift of cigars for Nathan Swift and a box of the nougat candy Charlotte liked. After making the purchases, she ambled along Anderson Street and suddenly stopped short in her tracks. Her heart gave a lurch, and she whirled quickly to gaze blankly into a drugstore window.

Getting out of a car across the street was Paul Farron. She knew every gesture, every lithe movement. As though mesmerized, Cory watched his reflection in the window glass. She was tightened into a clump of fear that he would see her and come over. But Paul didn't glance around. When he turned the corner, Cory flew down the street and made her way to the hospital.

She had not wanted to encounter him. But why? She owed him nothing. He was the one who should feel a touch of embarrassment if they met, after the way he had let her down. Yet all she knew was that she hadn't wanted to see him.

During her entire shift she was gripped by nervousness. Supposing he came to the hospital looking for her? Going down the hall with Loretta, she glanced over her shoulder so often that Loretta teased good-naturedly, "What's the matter? You act like a gangster or somebody is after you."

Every new footstep made Cory jump. When Leon picked her up, she feared meeting Paul around the restaurant. She told Leon she had a headache and would prefer to skip the coffee. Alone in her room, she dwelt on Paul still. Was he in town on a work break? Or had he reconsidered his parting from Roo and was now looking for her? Why should I care? Cory angrily asked herself. But her mind wouldn't let him go. Was Quinn's supposition true? Was she still under Paul Farron's spell? No. That was absurd.

Yet the next day and evening found Cory jumpy and keyed up again. All she needed was a verbal tussle with Wilma, which she got before the night was

over. Leon noticed her tension when he picked her up, and she pleaded weariness. He looked at her with solicitude.

"Good thing you're going to Doc Swift's tomorrow. I heard that Gozallis often gets carried away. He must think he's running a slave ship."

"He is a hard driver, but he's fair to his staff, Leon. We've just been extra busy and I'm tired."

"Well, get a good rest for yourself in Datlow." He paused and cleared his throat, giving her a half-shy, significant glance. "See you when you get back."

To get your answer, Cory thought with a faltering heart. Why couldn't she tell him now that it was no go? That she wasn't weary from work, but from sleepless nights, thinking about another man. That even while Leon was kissing her good-bye, her mind was filled with Paul Farron's presence in town and her dread that he would catch her before she left.

Buck Vego flew her to Datlow Springs the next day as arranged. Dr. Swift, up and about again, was not at home.

"I'd have to tie him to the bed post to keep him in," Charlotte sighed, then said that she wanted to hear all the news from Kovarik. When Cory came to the story of the Farron annulment, Charlotte said that she already knew.

"Jim said Roo was pretty upset. He gave her money just the other day for plane fare, and she took off for San Francisco or someplace."

Cory wondered whether Paul had tried to intercept Roo and make things up. If so, had he succeeded

or failed? She didn't tell the doctor's wife that she had seen him. For some obscure reason she couldn't bear discussion and speculation right now.

In bed she lay wide awake again, lacerated by indecision. She had halfway decided to work through the winter for Dr. Gozallis. Then the thought came that Paul might stay on, too. She couldn't stand seeing him around. It would be much too painful.

But if she were married to Leon, it would solve a lot of things. As Mrs. Rand, the wife of a Seattle mining man, with her own home and her own life, the comings and goings of Paul Farron wouldn't matter at all.

For a few moments Cory felt like turning on the lights and writing to Leon. She would tell him that she would marry him, and would mail the letter first thing tomorrow morning before she had a chance to change her mind. But words on paper were too cold for a situation like this. Shouldn't her acceptance be in person, the sharing of a mutual joy? She would see him soon, and she visualized his nice, serious face as she gave him her answer. Suddenly she felt a little frightened that another person's happiness could hinge on a word from her. Such an awesome power! It gave her pause, and she sighed ponderously.

No, she could never marry Leon to serve her own ends.

She tossed and turned restlessly, thinking, I should leave Alaska. It seems there's only confusion here for me.

When it was time for Cory to return to Kovarik,

she was in a more placid mood. She knew now what she had to do in regard to Leon. The main thing was that Paul Farron would be gone. Trask workers seldom stayed long in Kovarik.

As she approached Mrs. Webb's place the usual cluster of dusty parked cars clung to the curb, like barnacles stuck to a ship, and she paid them no attention. The landlady, who knew that Cory was expected back at this time, greeted her at the door with her puckered leprechaun face beaming.

"Young man to see you."

Cory's heart plummeted. Young man? Mrs. Webb knew Leon and Quinn by name. Could it be—him? But surely he had left town. She didn't want to see him; she wouldn't see him. Yet like an automaton she walked in the direction in which Mrs. Webb's twiglike finger pointed.

She opened the living-room door. Paul was looking out the window and whirled around as Cory entered. The width of the room stood between them.

When the familiar inner trembling began, Cory was infuriated, and her words came out with unaccustomed harshness. "What do you want?"

He took a step forward, but seeing her stiffen, he came no farther. "Just to talk to you, Cory."

She had gone out of town to avoid him, and now he had tracked her to her lair. "It's too late for talk. You shouldn't have come."

"But that's just it. It's not too late at all." His words rushed over one another.

Cory stared at him. "You've come here in the early months of your marriage to tell me this?"

For a moment Paul shook his head, smiling in a protesting way. "What I wanted to tell you is there's no marriage, Cory. It was a bad mistake. We're having it annulled."

She realized that this was his trump card, the announcement with which he had expected to take her by surprise. Her lack of reaction must have puzzled him.

She shrugged. "I know. Roo told me." She felt a brief surge of satisfaction to see his expression change.

He tried to rally his forces. "Well, I made a stupid mistake. I admit it. But that's all over now."

She said slowly, "I think it was over between us a long time ago, only I didn't know it."

"No, don't say that!"

Cory's voice rose. "You made the choice. You dumped *me*, remember?"

He advanced a few steps, holding out his hands. "I don't know what she told you—"

"Paul, it's finished. Get out of here and leave me alone."

"Cory, don't you see? That was no marriage—a short time like that. Legally there's no reason in the world why you and I—"

"Legally?" She could feel the blood rising to her face. "What about emotionally? Do you think for one minute that I'd have trust or faith in you ever again?"

"I thought you'd be a little more fair and understanding," he said reproachfully. "You don't know how it is for a man in a lonely place."

"You could have written to me. What about all those letters I sent?"

"Letters! I wanted *you*, Cory."

"Yes," she said bitterly, "and by the time I came, you had someone else." She began to realize that argument was useless. With Paul's facile tongue he could outtalk her. She was no match for him. She never had been. He put his hand on her arm and she flung it off. "Go away, Paul. It's no use."

He let out a long breath. "Whatever Roo told you sure poisoned your mind against me."

"She didn't say anything."

"Well, then, what is it? You loved me, Cory. You still do."

"You conceited—" Rage and frustration made her speechless. He could tell about her racing heart, her thumping pulse. He knew, damn him, he knew.

"God knows what she told you." He thrust his hands into his pockets and paced around the room. "Well, I'll tell you how it was with our dear Ruthann. We went around together—" He stopped and pointed a finger at Cory. "I'll bet you didn't sit home twiddling your thumbs while I was away, either. Okay, so Roo and I saw something of each other. But, Cory, I swear to God I intended to marry you.

"Then she came out that time. We went out with a crowd. There was a lot of drinking and partying. I said some foolish things. Try to understand. I wasn't myself."

Cory's head throbbed. She wanted to shout at him, I've heard all about your passionate romance before!

"Then she put pressure on me," Paul went on. "I felt I should do the right thing, so we had this hasty wedding. I was going to write you in Portland and tell you I was married. What a shock when I found out you were here! When I came to see you at the doc's I still didn't know the score. It wasn't till later that I found out Roo'd met you and then hightailed it out to me before I'd have a chance to see you. Isn't it plain, Cory? She tricked me into the marriage. So how could it be valid?"

Cory put her fingers to her aching temples. Out of nowhere came the decision to throw Leon Rand's proposal at him. "Someone here has asked me to marry him."

Paul's head shot up. "Who?"

"What difference does it make?"

"Are you going to?"

"I don't know yet."

His shoulders rose and fell. "Any new girl who comes to town is up for grabs. I guess you know that. There's so few of them."

Cory's brow darkened. He wouldn't even give her the credit of having attracted a man on her own merits.

"Who is he?" Paul persisted.

"A mining man from Seattle. Leon Rand."

His eyes narrowed as his thoughts backtracked. "I think I know who he is." Then he gave his little easy laugh, which had charmed her so often in the past. "Oh, come on, Cory. I could soon make you forget that guy."

All at once she felt very tired. "Don't come back here. You're wasting your time." She turned and walked out of the room.

From her window a few minutes later she saw him get into one of the dust-grimed cars and drive away. It upset her that the memory of Paul could not vanish as quickly as the sight of him. No matter how hard she willed it, the strange quivers and jumbled thoughts would not go away.

11

As she got ready for work the next afternoon Cory looked gloomily into the mirror and thought, I couldn't look worse if I'd been pulled through a knothole. At the hospital, however, there was a piece of news that lifted her spirits. Wilma was gone. Her husband had taken a job in Anchorage and they had left at once.

"Quick decision," Rose said.

Cory could not express open joy because Rose had been Wilma's friend, but she hugged to herself the relief that the daily skirmishes had come to an end.

Her mind was filled with a decision of her own. How would Leon take it? She hated to hurt anyone's feelings. Rejection, no matter how tactful, was a cruel thing.

There he was after work, faithful as ever, and Cory felt a little stab of regret. In the brightly lit coffee shop, his eyes rested on her in an affectionately worried way. "Cory, you still look pale and tired."

"I'm fine, Leon. We were busy tonight, that's all."

Small talk filled the interval, but somehow she knew he was waiting. Good heavens, the man had

been patient! He had waited long enough already. Last year Paul hadn't waited for her answer. He had wanted it—and got it—at once. Paul—

Cory swallowed. How hard it was to get the words out! "Leon, I'm flattered and –and honored by your proposal, and I've thought about it a lot"—she dropped her gaze –"but I don't think I'm the right one for you. I mean, I feel it wouldn't work out—"

In a minute he would start trying to persuade her. How could she convince him that this was for the best? "Really, this is all for the best." Cory forced her eyes to look at him.. Her first thought was that Leon was taking it well. He didn't look greatly surprised. Disappointed? Yes, somewhat, but not to the point that he would do something drastic.

"So you see how it is," Cory finished lamely.

Leon nodded soberly. "I sort of—gathered how you felt."

"I'm sorry, Leon."

He put down his cup and touched her hand. "Either it's there or it isn't, Cory. It's not something a person can turn on and off." His brown eyes crinkled at the corners. "Good friends?"

"Sure." She hesitated and then began, "But I was just thinking—"

"I know," Leon said when she paused. "You'd rather not have these nightly coffee klatches any more. Right?"

Cory nodded, grateful that he was making it easy for her. "Well, under the circumstances—"

Leon offered a toast with the coffee. "To Cory: I wish you luck in whatever you do."

She held up her cup and said, "To Leon: happiness always."

During the short ride home she was the solemn, retrospective one, while Leon made congenial conversation. Their good-bye possessed none of the melodrama she had envisioned. Afterward she sank onto her bed, feeling curiously deflated. She had dreaded their farewell because of Leon's devastation, and yet there he was, surviving remarkably well.

All at once the humor of it struck her. Why had she ever considered herself a charmer whom Leon Rand couldn't live without? She wasn't the type that men fought duels over. But I could've had Leon, she thought, and wondered for a moment if she had made a mistake. Then, as always, thoughts of Paul Farron filled her mind. Why did the sight of him still move her so much after all that had happened?

Cory turned off the light and stood in her robe at the window, looking down at the quiet street. When Paul had surprised her here at the house, she had handled it ably and kept her dignity, hadn't she? What had he expected her to do—leap at his belated offer like a trained seal after a fish? No doubt he would be back. Well, he would have to court her all over again before they could proceed on their old basis, if indeed they ever could at all.

The Lamonts came to town a few days later. While Luke went to the farm-equipment rental depot, Cory took Edie and the little girls to a restaurant for lunch. Over blueberry cobbler dessert, she told her friend about Paul Farron's visit and her amicable breakup with Leon.

Edie's eyes were thoughtful. "Was it his popping up again that made you turn down Leon?"

Cory sipped her coffee slowly. "I don't think so. I had more or less decided that already." She left unsaid a half-formed thought: Less than a week ago I was afraid Paul would keep returning to Kovarik. Now I'm afraid he might not. "Vivian can't come back for a while," she said, moving to safer ground, "so I'm going to keep on working here."

"Good! We'll have you snowed in with us for the winter yet."

At Cory's look of alarm Edie laughed. "No, not in Kovarik, not any more. You can always get out when you want to. But there are times when we still get stranded around Datlow."

"Do you think the Swifts will move here soon?"

"Charlotte wants to. She worries about Nate's heart. Cory, you should see her hands, they're really bad. She doesn't complain, but I bet when he agrees to move it'll be for her sake, not his own."

Cory had a sudden idea that she quickly put into action. She succeeded in changing her day off with Wilma's successor, Catherine, an agreeable nurse with whom she worked harmoniously. Then she got hold of Loretta and postponed the movie date they had planned.

Within the hour Cory was on her way to Datlow Springs with the Lamonts, absorbed in lively talk with Sue and Debbie in the back seat. At the end of the ride Skookum greeted her at the Swifts' gate like an old friend.

"Surprise! Me again." When Cory entered the

house, a tide of warmth flowed through her at the gladness on the couple's faces.

"I love unexpected visits!" Charlotte cried.

"You're too polite to say, 'Back so soon?' "

"What we're saying," Nathan declared, "is how long can you stay?"

"Till tomorrow afternoon. Luke said I can catch a ride back on one of the lumber trucks."

It's strange, Cory reflected. A few months ago the Swifts and I had never heard of each other. Now I can come and go with this affectionate camaraderie between us.

During her stay she quietly accomplished a number of small tasks that had become hard for Charlotte to do. But to Charlotte a large part of the pleasure in Cory's visits was the chance for conversation. Unlike many people who loved to talk, Charlotte was also a good listener.

Later when Nate went out, Cory told her about turning Leon's marriage offer aside. The doctor's wife looked at her in a contemplative way. "Not in love with him?"

"No, I wasn't."

"That other guy been around?"

"You mean Quinn?" Cory asked, although she knew very well who was meant. "I see him off and on."

"No, your old boy friend."

"Paul?" In spite of herself Cory flushed. "Yes, he came to see me," she admitted.

"Wants to get together again?"

"Yes." She raised her head and met Charlotte's

eyes. "But I'm not sure about myself. I was so certain before, but now I don't know."

Charlotte gave the girl's arm a quick squeeze. "Don't rush into anything with him, Cory."

Was she implying that Paul was faithless? Cory surprised herself by coming to his defense. "I don't think it's fair to condemn a person for one mistake."

The older woman regarded her with shrewd, kindly eyes. "No, that wouldn't be fair, would it?" She looked off into space and murmured something, almost to herself, so that Cory had to lean forward to catch it. "I thought Quinn had it wrong, but I guess he didn't."

What did Quinn have to do with it?

"He said one time," the woman went on in the same reflective tone, "that it was just his luck to meet somebody who turned out to be a one-man woman."

What did *that* mean? Cory gave a short nervous laugh and said, "Enough about my love life." And the subject lay undisturbed for the rest of her visit.

That night after supper Nathan said, "We have a fishing date early tomorrow morning with the Dupres. They're going down the Oralo a way in their boat. Why don't you come along, Cory?"

"Would you mind if I didn't? I'm in a lazy mood."

"Four A.M. doesn't appeal, eh?"

"I don't have to go," Charlotte put in.

"Go," Cory said firmly. "I'd feel bad if my dropping in made you change your plans."

"Okay. You can stay in bed late and get a good rest. We'll probably be back by midmorning and then have a nice lunch together."

At bedtime Cory luxuriated in a shock-free shower, since the water temperature, unlike that at Mrs. Webb's, was predictable and controlled.

The last thing she heard before dropping into a deep sleep was the call of an animal—was it a coyote? The faint, thin sound seemed to embody all the wild freedom of this wonderful land.

Cory was awakened from a sound sleep by quick footsteps on the porch and a loud knocking at the front door. She dragged herself out of bed and peered at her watch on the nightstand. Seven-thirty. Someone for the doctor, no doubt. Nathan couldn't take a moment's recreation without somebody clamoring for him. She pulled on her pink terry cloth robe and hurried to the door. A young man with frightened eyes and disheveled hair stood in the rosy morning light. Cory didn't recall him from any previous visits.

"I want the doctor right away!" he cried.

"He'll be back in a few hours."

"A few hours!" He rubbed his head distractedly. "Is Mrs. Swift home?" When Cory shook her head he asked, "Where are they? Can't we get hold of him?"

"They're fishing somewhere on the river. What is it? Maybe I can help." At his look of despair she added, "I'm a nurse."

"It's my wife. She needs Doc Swift. Her pains started a while ago and got real strong."

"Labor pains? First baby?"

He nodded, and Cory tried to sound professional as she said, "A first baby is usually in no hurry. The doctor will be back soon. Bring her inside." Surely

she could cope with a woman in labor until Nathan arrived.

"But that's just it!" He flung out his hands. "My Ford wouldn't start. I ran to Johnson's house, but they were already gone, so I rode in on their mare."

Cory put a hand to her lips. "You mean your wife's home alone?"

"There wasn't anything else I could do!"

Cory dropped her hand and strove for calmness in front of the man. The thing to do was to get the patient here at once. Her gaze went past him to the Swifts' parked truck; they had used the jeep this morning. Luckily she knew where the extra keys were.

"Look, I'll go home with you in the doctor's pickup. We'll bring your wife back here to the dispensary. Okay?"

Did she have time to get dressed? No. She scribbled a note to the Swifts in case they came back ahead of her, which she devoutly hoped they would. "What's your name?"

"Ed Lindahl."

Cory wrote it down, got the keys, and ran out after him through dew-wet grass. He quickly tethered his neighbor's horse to the rear of the truck, and they jumped in. Ed manipulated the wheel so wildly along the dusty road that Cory regretted not doing the driving herself. "Hey, take it easy!"

"Fay wasn't due for another two weeks," he said unheedingly. "Thought I'd have her settled safe in Kovarik Hospital."

"She's Dr. Swift's patient and has had prenatal care all along? She'll be fine, and the baby, too."

Cory clung to the door handle as the truck plunged down a grade and screeched around a turn. The Lindahls seemed to live halfway up the mountain. The vehicle roared near a sagging wooden flume, later past an old abandoned mine that stared out of the hillside like a sightless eye. The view was spectacular, if Cory had been interested in it. Her only thought was that the young couple should have left this domain to the bighorn sheep or whatever hardy species chose to roam it.

"You really live far from everything," she remarked.

"We're just up here for the summer. I'm with the Forestry Service. Thought we'd be back in town before this happened."

The cabin was tucked into a sheltered fold of hillside. Ed brought the truck to a growling stop beside his balky car in a cleared-off area. Cory heard the woman before she saw her, and she paled at the sound of the animal-like cries. They ran in and found her tossing on the bed, her hair clinging around her damp face, her eyes terror-ridden. She was no more than twenty.

"It's going to be all right." Cory tried to make her tone soothing.

Ed bent over her tensely. "This is a nurse, Fay. We're taking you to the doc's place."

"It's going to be—just like it—it was with Irene," the girl gasped.

"No, no," her husband said. "Stop that, you hear? You're going to be fine."

Cory touched his arm. When she caught his eye, her lips formed the question, "Who's Irene?" He beckoned her into the little kitchen and spoke rapidly.

"Her sister in Canada who died in childbirth four years ago in the hospital. Fay wasn't nervous up till now, unless she kept it to herself." His face was white. "But with this coming on so sudden—"

"We've got to get her to Dr. Swift's right away." She hurried back to the bedside. Fay groaned, then suddenly arched her back and screamed as sharp pains gripped her. Cory held her hand tightly and looked at the clock on the dresser. Fay's screams subsided into moans, and Cory wiped the perspiration from her forehead as her mind raced ahead. They could fix up a cot in the truck and Cory would ride back with her. But it seemed no time before Fay yelled and strained again. Another contraction. They were coming awfully fast! Cory's heart began pounding in fright.

When the girl sagged back and lay comparatively still, Cory said, "Try to relax for a minute, Fay." It was hard to hold her voice steady. "I have to take a look."

White-faced, Ed hovered around the door. "Come on, let's get going!"

"We're not going anywhere. It's too late." Better here than in back of the truck.

A terrible sob broke from Fay's throat. "I told you —like Irene!"

"No, no!" Cory could have kicked herself for her unfortunate choice of words. "I mean you're about ready to deliver. You'll have your baby safely, right here—" She was far from feeling as competent as she tried to sound. This would be a lot different from assisting at births in a well-equipped delivery room.

"Ed, you've got to help me." One look at his ashen face and she knew he wouldn't be much good. It was always the big rugged ones who dropped like felled oxen when they saw a smear of blood.

"Get me a lot of newspapers or some sort of padding," Cory ordered. "We'll need hot water." If the doctor didn't arrive, she might have to cut the umbilical cord. "Get your sharpest scissors and boil them. And get some string or lengths of gauze." She looked around. "Do you have a little bed for the baby? Good. Get hot-water bags or jars of warm water, cover them well, and put them in the baby's bed. And let's see—leave a small blanket handy."

Ed stumbled around doing what she had asked. Cory turned her full attention to Fay. A streak of panic flared at the thought of possible complications, and she smothered it at once. Think positive!

As she placed protective padding on the bed and heard Fay's rambling talk, Cory realized that her biggest problem might be the girl's obsession with death. It magnified Fay's physical discomfort, tightening her into a knot of fear.

Cory threw off her bulky terry robe and pinned a clean towel over her pajamas. She scrubbed her hands as thoroughly as she could and placed a clean sheet under Fay's hips. Then she spoke calmly, trying

to get her attention. "During your pregnancy did you learn anything about natural childbirth, Fay?"

The girl twisted about, lost in her own world of pain and dread.

"Here, grip my wrists." After the rush of pain was over, Cory sponged her face briefly with a wet cloth. "Try to breathe deeply, Fay. It'll help."

"I'm going to die!" The shrill words trailed away into gurgling sobs.

Cory took Fay's head in her hands and bent down, looking into the wild eyes. "You're not going to die. Your labor's going along in a normal way. Do you understand, Fay? Your baby's trying to be born, so let it. Don't tense up your muscles and hold back. Bear down. Let your baby come!"

Did she get through to her? Cory couldn't tell. The piteous cries continued. She took it as a ray of hope that instead of talking about dying, Fay now sobbed, "Oh, God! Help me, somebody help me!"

"We will. We'll help you."

Cory called Ed over from where he lurked nervously at the door. "Let her hang on to your hands tight. And talk to her, reassure her."

When he had haltingly complied, Cory told him in a low tone, "I think it'll be pretty soon now. Ed, you've got to help me hold her down."

Fear and reluctance washed over his face, and Cory gripped his arm. "Listen, it'll be quick when it happens, and I can handle it then. But you've got to keep her as still as you can. Okay? There'll be blood," she warned, "but just remember that birth's a very natu-

ral thing." She gave his arm a final squeeze. "Come on, new daddy."

Cory didn't like the greenish cast of his face, but there was no time for worrying. She positioned Fay, with Ed's help, and readied herself.

"When the big contractions come, pant through your mouth, Fay. Come on," she encouraged, "try to pant. It helps." Fifteen minutes passed; it seemed a century to the trio in the little room. Cory's forehead was beaded with sweat. Ah, at last she could see the head.

"Bear down, Fay. You're doing fine. Your baby's almost here. No, don't hold back. That's the way! Good girl, good girl—"

A final piercing scream, and then Cory had the infant in her hands, a pink little pugilist with sparse wet hair. She picked the baby up gently by the feet and held it, head down, to let the mucus drain out of the breathing passage. Within a few moments it was breathing well. Its first strong cry was sweeter than Mozart to Cory.

"A little girl." She wrapped her in the small blanket, leaving the cord slack, and placed her atop the new mother's abdomen.

"Is she—all right?" Fay quavered.

"Perfect."

Fay, white and exhausted, put a hand on the tiny flanneled form and began softly to half cry, half laugh. Cory was surprised not to find Ed in a heap on the floor. Although he looked worse than his wife, he gallantly held her other hand and kissed her, then

peeked at the baby. As soon as Fay's eyes closed, however, he headed for the door, mumbling something about fresh air.

Cory was tired, yet she felt a great sense of exhilaration. She had just got a basin ready when she heard the sound of a motor. Could it possibly be Nathan Swift?

It was indeed, rushing in with Ed and taking everything in at a glance.

Cory gave him a smile and said, "Well, better late than never!" She slumped with relief and let him take charge, welcoming with long, grateful gulps the coffee Ed offered her in a few moments. "I see you got my note," she said.

"Yes," Nathan said from the bedside. "We came back from fishing sooner than expected. The older you get the faster you grow tired." He threw her a quick glance. "You did a good job here." He turned his attention back to Fay. "Little mother, pretty soon we're going to take you and the baby to my place for a few days."

Fay's eyelids fluttered open. "Do I have to stay in bed there?"

"No, but we don't want you scrubbing floors and cooking and washing right away. It will give you a chance to get back on your feet."

"While you're there, Fay," Ed said, "I'll get us moved back to town."

"Where's the nurse?" Fay looked up weakly from her pillow. "What's your name? I don't even know your name."

"Cora Hanson."

"We both want to thank you," Ed said gravely.

"Cora." Fay lightly touched her baby. "We were going to name a girl Madeline Ann. But, Ed, let's name her Madeline Cora."

"How about that? A baby named after me," Cory said to Charlotte that afternoon before she left.

"Famous already!" Charlotte's eyes rolled around. "Nate tells me you can hang out your shingle any time. 'Midwife of Datlow Springs.' "

12

"Heard you say one time that you liked baseball," Quinn said as he caught Cory going to work a few afternoons later. "Our local heroes are playing this week. Like to catch them on your free day?"

"Love to! I haven't been to a game this season."

They set up the date, and as she went on to the hospital she felt a surge of happiness. It was good to have something to look forward to, and what could be nicer than going out with Quinn?

Down the street Cory saw Leon's car passing by, and she looked after it with quickening interest. Leon was not alone. She hadn't got a good look at his companion, but it was obviously a woman. Cory thought, Well, what do you know?

When the baseball-game day arrived, Cory wore a white turtleneck sweater with a pair of trim forest-green pants she had just bought. The sun appeared and disappeared behind banks of threatening clouds, and Quinn put their raincoats into the trunk of the car.

"It's at the high-school ball park," he said as he drove along, "and I guarantee you more spirit and

excitement than at Yankee Stadium. They take their baseball seriously around here."

A good-sized crowd was streaming into the stands. When they were in their seats on the third-base side, Cory looked around with interest. Vendors were readying their wares and people were waving wildly. Every moment Quinn was calling out to, or answering, someone he knew.

Once the game began, everyone settled down to watch. Favorite players drew loud cheers. On close decisions that were unfavorable to the home team, the umpires were soundly booed. The visiting team was strong, and excitement mounted as the Kovarik nine called on its ace relief pitcher to achieve victory.

The weak sun had long since given up its struggle and disappeared, but although the sky was overcast, the rain held off. Like Quinn and the surrounding fans, Cory caught the spirit of the game. By turns she jumped up shouting or sat engrossed, with the box lunch Quinn had bought untouched on her lap. In the last inning, when their team laboriously squeezed in the winning run, she joined the entire stadium in clapping and yelling until she was nearly hoarse. Thunder rumbled in the distance, as though adding volume to the applause.

"You didn't eat yours, either." Cory pointed to the box of food Quinn carried as they shuffled through the throng to an exit.

"To tell you the truth, I forgot about it. You, too? Maybe it's just as well. With all that screaming we might've choked."

"Hey, Quinn, let's eat now, like a picnic. Is there a park nearby?"

"If you mean trees, grass, and pretty scenery, anywhere beyond town is a park. I know a nice spot by the river that won't be overrun by fishermen at this time of day."

He took a road that ran past the gravel works and continued until most of the straggly little buildings on the outskirts had been left behind. The car slipped past meadows whose bright green color seemed subdued on this gray day. After a while two ruts led off toward the east, and Quinn bumped his car along them to the Oralo.

When they got out of the car, Cory thought she heard faint cries, like those of a woodland animal. There was a louder noise, too, the sound of rushing water. Quinn took her arm and drew her toward it.

"Oh, this is pretty!" She gazed in pleasure at the foaming miniature rapids that had been created by a small rock shelf across the river. Tree-shaded ferns grew luxuriantly along the banks, and oddly shaped gray stones, darkened with spray, poked up out of the water.

The shrill cries came again, closer now. Cory looked around, startled, and Quinn smiled and pointed downstream. In a calm little inlet, away from the rushing currents, three dark heads bobbed. Then, chattering like chipmunks, a trio of small brown bodies clambered up the rocks. With squeals and yells they jumped in again, feet first, one of the boys holding his nose.

Cory laughed at their sheer exuberance. "What are

they doing way out here? Isn't the river dangerous?"

"They're smart enough to stick to that safe little pool. I think they're Athapaskan kids who probably live somewhere nearby." A reminiscent smile touched his mouth. "My brother and I did lots of skinny-dipping when we were growing up in Colorado."

"Is he older or younger than you?"

"Three years older."

"My brother's four years older than I am. I was the perennial pesty little sister," Cory recalled whimsically, "following him and his gang and regularly getting thrown out of their backyard clubhouse."

"The older one is always your idol."

"Yes, I was always trying to catch up with Mike."

"And did you?"

She laughed. "Not really, I guess. He got married right out of college and has two little boys. He teaches in a high school in New Hampshire."

If the Indian boys noticed the couple, they paid them no heed but went on frolicking like young otters.

Cory and Quinn roamed farther downriver and ate their late lunch under a big pine whose resinous aroma filled the air as the wind rustled through its branches.

"I heard you delivered a baby on your own," he said at length.

"Nothing to it," she replied airily as she salted her hard-boiled egg. So he had been in touch with the Swifts. She wondered what else he had heard.

Quinn pressed his paper napkin into a ball, making idle conversation for a few minutes. After a short

silence he seemed about to say something, but just then raindrops as large as pennies began falling all around them.

They hastily gathered up their lunch litter and ran, hand in hand. Thick foliage came between them and the brunt of the rainfall. They caught sight of the Indian boys leaping in and out of the water like fauns, shrieking with laughter as the rain pelted their bare bodies. How wild and free and innocent they were, like creatures of the woods and streams.

Quinn and Cory, damp and breathless, scrambled into the car from opposite doors. Their heads bumped midway. "Ow!" Exclamations came out strangled by laughter. Cory collapsed in merriment on the seat, ruefully rubbing her forehead. Quinn slammed his door and reached across to close hers, shutting out the slashing rain.

Then he took her head betwen his hands. "Lumps and bruises?" He smiled, doing a mock examination.

Cory grinned as she looked up into his face; then she noticed the change in it. Had it happened gradually or all at once? Quinn's fingers tightened around her head, and the jocosity faded from his features. In the next moment his lips were on hers as their rain-wet faces came together. Cory made a slight, startled movement, as though to pull away. Quinn's hands released her head, and at first she thought he was letting her go. Then she felt the grip of his arms encircling her as he held her more tightly. Against such fierce intensity how puerile her half-hearted resistance seemed! Cory's hands pushed feebly for an

instant against his chest, then they went limp, and she let herself float on the tide of her emotions.

Dimly she was aware of the rain drumming on the roof and a crashing that was the distant thunder. It all seemed vague and far away. The only reality was the sheltered intimacy of the car, like a small haven in the storm, and the man against whose strong body she was pressed.

When they drew apart at last, Cory was deeply shaken, and she didn't know why. She had been kissed by this man and by other men before, so why this feeling? Quickly she tried to cover her confusion with flippancy.

"What brought *that* on?" She gave a nervous laugh. Through the streaming windows the greenery outside was blurred and indistinct, and the feeling of unreality persisted. Picking up her scarf from the seat, she dabbed at her damp hair with it. "Lucky we didn't get very wet," she babbled. "Look at how it's coming down now. The road's going to be like a creek."

Quinn dragged his attention to the weather. After a while he said, "We'd better wait till it lets up before starting back." Still looking out at the pewter curtain of rain, he said unexpectedly, "So you broke off with Rand."

Cory abandoned her skittish facade, and her hands lay quiet in her lap. "Yes."

"In order to go back to Farron?"

His directness caught Cory unaware, and this annoyed her. Why should you care? she felt like retort-

ing. Instead, she said testily, "I don't know," and added inexplicably, "Paul came to see me." As if Quinn wasn't aware of that. Spies, it seemed, were everywhere.

"That was nice of him," he said.

She looked at him sharply. His eyes could be dove-gray soft or the gray of granite. "You don't have to be sarcastic," she said. In another minute they would be fighting. What crazy sort of a day was this, where moods could change in a flash?

"And you don't have to be so touchy." Quinn turned sideways and looked at her. "If I seem nosy it's just because I'm—I'm interested—"

Her pulses quickened. Interested in her as more than a friend? Even as she was thinking this, he went on, "—interested in what happens to you."

There was a difference. Cory let out her breath.

"I've been wondering," he said slowly. "Cory, do you really know Farron that well? I mean, you've been apart most of the time since you met him."

"Know him?" Cory cried. "Of course I know him. There are things you don't measure in weeks and months." Suddenly her eyes were deep pools of suspicion. "Have you dug up some unpleasant rumor about Paul to tell me about?"

Quinn shook his head and gave her a bleak smile. "If I did you'd defend him left and right, wouldn't you? No," he sighed as he started the motor, "I should've kept my big mouth shut. Forget it, Cory."

The wipers swished across the windshield with a slap-slap sound as the car slowly made its way down the muddy road. The downpour had dwindled into a

thin, steady rain, and the thunder and lightning had moved on.

They spoke of trivial things, but Cory's mind was on Quinn's behavior. That sudden kiss was an accident of the moment, she decided. And his queries about her other boy friends? He merely had a friendly interest in her well-being.

Still, she couldn't deny—nor did she want to—that there had been something between them in the small confines of the car. Something nebulous, intangible, yet deep for a brief moment or two while the rain beat unnoticed around them and the wet tree branches swayed in the wind.

13

"What happened to Leon?" Rose's voice rang through the hospital corridor for all to hear.

Cory glanced around in discomfiture. She might have known that Rose wouldn't let his absence pass unnoticed. She was a big-hearted woman whose worst fault was sticking her nose into everybody's business.

Cory spirited her off to a quiet corner of the hall and told her that she and Leon had broken up and that he wouldn't be calling for her any more.

Rose crackled with indignation. "Why, you poor little thing!"

"There was no fight. We parted good friends."

Rose's dubious look said, A likely story. "Well, don't you sit home pining about him." She grabbed Cory's arm. "Tell you what! I have this cousin about your age, named Walter—"

"It's okay," Cory said in a burst of alarm. "Thanks, anyway." She had met Walter, who looked an unfledged seventeen and tried to act a suave thirty-five. She was tempted to mention Quinn as her boy friend, but before she could, Rose said generously, "No bother. I'll set up a date for you two."

When you do, I'll hang a "Smallpox" sign on my door, Cory vowed.

The next day she discoveed that Rose had lost no time.

"You're off Friday night, aren't you?" Rose asked. "If you're not doing anything, my husband and I would like to take you out."

Walter, mercifully, was not in town, at which news Cory accepted the invitation. "So it'll only be a threesome this time," Rose mourned.

On Friday evening Cory put on a dressy print she had brought from Portland. She tried to put out of her mind the errant thought that Paul Farron had liked her in this dress, whose shades of gold and amber created a watercolor effect.

At the designated hour the couple called for her at Mrs. Webb's. The fullness of Rose's figure was disguised beneath a loose-flowing, plum-colored dress, and her wild short hair had been nominally tamed for the occasion. It's nice of them to bother about me, Cory granted. The ebullient nurse meant well.

Monty, her husband, was as lean as Rose was stout, and had a short staccato laugh that barked out often. They went first to Andy's Restaurant for dinner. The waiter, who knew the couple, greeted them with a flourish. He also recognized Cory, who had been in on different occasions with Leon and Quinn. He asked if another man was expected. Cory shook her head and reflected, He must think I've fallen on hard times, tagging along like this.

But the meal was excellent, the service good, the

company cheerful, and she thanked Rose and Monty with sincerity. Then they drove out of town to Dell's. As Monty parked the car they could hear music flowing from the low, long building.

The place was crowded. A blue, smoky haze hung over the room. Like an army general sighting an objective, Rose spotted a group she knew and she led her party forcefully in that direction. Amid a barrage of greetings, the people moved and pushed to make room at the next table for the trio.

Cory looked around, recalling the only other time she had been here. It had been with Quinn during her first week in Kovarik, and she felt a twinge of something she couldn't identify.

Rose and Monty's friends were loud and affable. The men willingly took turns dancing with Cory, and the women asked questions and gave advice on Alaskan living almost in the same breath. Cory's amiable nature found enjoyment, if not delight, in the evening. It beat the only other activity she might have scheduled, that of reading in bed.

They had been there an hour or more when Cory came face to face with a girl at the edge of the dance floor. The girl spoke to her, and Cory realized that her round face looked vaguely familiar. When she identified herself as Barbara, Cory remembered that she had been with Quinn's group that other time.

Back in her seat, Cory's eyes roamed over the tables. Since Quinn had come with that crowd before, maybe he was here tonight. But she didn't see him. After a while Monty unknowingly interrupted her secret search.

"Come on, little Cory. All that good music's going to waste!"

It was over Monty's lean shoulder that she finally saw Quinn. He sat partly turned away from the dance floor, talking to another man. But it was to someone else that Cory's gaze flew.

Most of the chairs around Quinn's table were empty. Apparently the people were dancing. Three chairs were occupied, two by the men and one by a girl who sat very close to Quinn, a girl Cory had never seen before. As Monty swung Cory around, she strained to get a better look at her. She was a very pretty honey blonde with good features and an animated expression. And something more that made Cory's spirits dampen. The girl had her arm linked in Quinn's, resting there with an easy familiarity that bespoke a long acquaintance. She was about twenty-six, Quinn's age, and had a sophisticated, poised air about her.

All at once Cory felt awkward and gauche. A sudden fear gripped her that Quinn would see her, and for some reason she didn't want him to. When Monty escorted her back to their table, she made sure that she sat with her back toward Quinn. She glimpsed him later out on the dance floor; he and the blonde girl were dancing with that same suggestion of closeness. Cory pleaded need of a rest when one of the men suggested a dance. She knew she would be flustered if she bumped into Quinn and his partner out there.

Yet when she saw Barbara heading for the ladies' room, Cory got up and threaded her way unob-

trusively among the tables. In front of the mirror in the ladies' room she struck up a conversation with Barbara. Oh, this is so obvious, she thought unhappily, but she couldn't help herself. In the mirror she saw the honey blonde pass through to the inner room, and she seized on her appearance as an opening. She could think of no subtle way to approach the topic.

"I noticed that blonde girl. Who is she?" How blunt it sounded.

Barbara glanced around. "You mean Elaine?" Then her eyes met Cory's anxious ones in the mirror.

She knows I was with Quinn that other time. She knows I'm snooping around now. What if she tells Quinn about this? Oh, I have no pride. I don't care.

They moved off to one side, away from several other women edging for the mirror. Barbara's expression was gentle, and Cory took heart.

"She's an old girl friend of Quinn's from somewhere else," Barbara told her. "Just the other day she came here looking for him. I guess they'd lost touch."

Looking for him, like me chasing Paul Farron. Only this girl's got the one she was after. "She's very attractive," Cory said.

"And nice." Barbara pocketed her lipstick and drifted away.

I know how Elaine feels, Cory thought. It made her more miserable than ever. She trailed back to her table and was relieved to see that Rose's group was about to leave for someone's home for a nightcap. As Cory tagged along dutifully, she took small comfort

in the fact that she had succeeded in getting out of Dell's without encountering Quinn.

For the first time since Cory had begun work at Kovarik Hospital, there were a few empty beds. This slight slump meant that a nurse could sip a cup of coffee on her break without two or three interruptions. She could enter the rest room without being instantly paged. It also meant that Cory, now on days, was not worn out at the end of her shift. With every evening free, how she would have welcomed some interesting dates!

Walter, egged on by his cousin Rose, was a nuisance at times, and the lunch-counter man had become so persistent that Cory had changed her eating places. Was there no such thing as a genuinely enjoyable, companionable date?

Even before the baseball game she had had the notion that Quinn's feeling was becoming deeper than mere brotherly concern. She wasn't at all displeased at this, which tended to puzzle her. Was it simply woman's vanity, the triumph of snaring a man whether she really wanted him or not? But she hadn't felt such vanity with Leon. She had worried because he liked her too well, when she would have preferred their being just friends.

But now she wondered whether she had been reading more into Quinn's attitude than was actually there. That kiss in the rain had probably been no more than an impulse, after all. What of Elaine, with her good looks and forthright way, who had trailed

Quinn from Fairbanks or wherever? When I appeared on the scene, Cory thought, this is how Roo Ellman must have felt, only more so, because Roo had been in love with Paul. Her own feeling for Quinn was—what was it, anyway?

A liking, a comfortableness with him, a sort of attunement. Surely not love. Not the terrible, wonderful aching that had possessed her with Paul Farron. First love, was there anything like it ever again? Tenuous yet strong, a silken cord that would not break.

Still, if Cory didn't care seriously about Quinn, why was she consumed with this unlikely jealousy? From a distance she had seen Elaine and Quinn around town several times during the past few days, and the sight chafed her nerves raw each time. Why did Elaine's beauty and her ease with Quinn depress and trouble Cory? Since the evening at Dell's with Rose's friends, she found herself open to a whole new range of emotions the depth of which she couldn't fathom.

She began to count the days until Vivian's return, when she planned to spend a week with the Swifts. Maybe in the quietude of Datlow Springs she could sort out her thoughts and make some definite commitment. She had already half promised Dr. Gozallis that she would stay on.

"Even with Vivian back, you can see how much you'll be needed," he had told her as he waved a hand around the crowded ward. "During the winter, on top of everything else, we'll have our usual quota of injured skiers."

She was inclined to stay. It was good to be needed as a nurse. Yet strange seeds of dissatisfaction sprouted within her. When she rooted them out and examined them, Cory concluded that being needed as a person by another individual was perhaps the most important of all. The catch was that the feeling had to be mutual. There seemed no available man on the horizon with whom Cory Hanson had such a rapport.

The brief slack at the hospital was soon taken up by several new patients. Then a series of emergencies filled the place to capacity.

"Here we go again," Catherine said to Cory. "That little respite was just to tantalize us."

The staff resettled itself into its usual busy state, and Dr. Gozallis's deep voice could be heard at unexpected hours when everyone thought he had left.

Cory came home from work one afternoon and headed for the kitchen for her panacea of a cup of strong hot tea. She found Mrs. Webb deep in conversation with a neighbor. The two women seemed to start guiltily when Cory entered, and she wondered if they had been talking about her. She postponed her tea-making until the neighbor left.

When Mrs. Webb began to chatter nervously about nothing, Cory lingered purposely by the stove. The landlady was not good at subterfuge. Her efforts to appear nonchalant were transparent and unsuccessful.

"Mrs. Webb, what's the matter? Something's bothering you."

The woman denied it, her gnome face pink. But with some gentle prodding from Cory it gradually

came out. "I knew you didn't hear about it yet. Now don't let it upset you, Cory."

"Please, what is it?"

"Well, Mr. Rand—Leon," the little widow faltered, "him and Dorothy Levitz—she's going to Seattle with him. Going to get married."

"Oh." It shouldn't surprise me, Cory thought. But it did. Apparently Mrs. Webb had feared the news would crush her.

"You know her? A typist downtown. Divorced. Has a little boy about four years old."

"Yes, I know who she is." Cory got a cup and saucer from the cupboard. "Mrs. Webb, you don't have to feel bad about this on my account." I had my chance with Leon and turned him down. That would sound arrogant, Cory thought, and didn't say it. "He's a nice person, and I'm sure she is, too."

"Yes, she is," Mrs. Webb agreed. She seemed relieved that Cory had taken the news so stoically. Her puckered face mirrored her thoughts: Poor Cory Hanson. Two men in a row throwing her aside for other women.

"Here. These'll be nice with your tea." The little figure bustled around and unearthed from the depths of her oven something that was, literally, a burnt offering.

But the thought was what counted, and Cory thanked her as she went to her room. The food sat untouched as she lay back on her bed, gazing at the ceiling. Leon had been eager to get married, there was no question about it. So he didn't especially want *me,* Cory thought with a touch of irony, and it was a

blow of sorts to her pride. He just wanted *somebody,* a person of his own choosing. No doubt any average, decent girl who came along at this time would have been suitable and who's to say such a marriage wouldn't work out? Leon and Dorothy, two lonely people, would probably be very happy.

Just the same, I'm glad I'm not the one, Cory thought, sitting up to absently sip the tea and risk her teeth on the petrified brownies. Romance would die hard in Cory Hanson. She still wanted to hear bells ringing and a nightingale's song.

Later she called Loretta about a movie, but the girl couldn't make it, so Cory decided to go alone. After her shower she put on a gray wool jumper over a finely knit, long-sleeved purple shirt and thrust her arms into her tweed coat.

Along Anderson Street she came face to face with Roger and Pat, who were emerging from a hardware store. Cory hadn't seen them in some time, and for a moment there was an awkward pause.

Their flustered expressions made Cory feel that they thought the same as Mrs. Webb. Poor Cory, abandoned by Leon. To put them at their ease, she said, "I heard about Dorothy and Leon and I'm happy for them."

Pat's thin face broke into its usual smile, and the half-formed lines of anxiety on her husband's pink face began to melt away.

"Yes, they're leaving soon." Apparently to spare Cory's feelings in some way, Pat added, "It was sort of sudden."

I wonder if I should go see Leon and wish him

luck, Cory thought. She quickly decided on another course. "When you see Leon, will you please tell him I wish them both the best of everything?"

Pat nodded. "We will." Her eyes rested sympathetically on Cory. "Leon sort of told us how it was with you. I mean, if somebody's deep in a person's heart and mind, that's the way it is. It just becomes impossible for another person to make any sort of impression, that's all."

Cory murmured a suitable reply. So Leon, too, had felt that Paul Farron was still too firmly entrenched in her heart to leave room for anyone else. But Paul isn't, not really, she silently protested, while a little voice whispered, He's not? You're sure he's not?

She pulled her attention back as Pat said, "Don't be a stranger in our house, Cory," and Roger echoed her invitation.

Good, nice people, Cory thought as she walked on. Her last link with Leon Rand.

At the hospital the next afternoon she came back from lunch to a scene of mass upheaval. The everyday beehive of activity had accelerated to that of a disturbed hornet's nest.

"What happened?" she asked John as he hurried by.

"An accident. Three men. God knows where we're going to put them." He sped away.

Cory hastened to the nurses' station and threw questions at Loretta.

"Collision," Loretta said. "I think a car and a truck. No fatalities as far as I know."

Cory rushed toward Emergency and met Rose on the way. "I was looking for you, Cory." There was something different about Rose's expression and the way she drew her aside. It caused a cold twinge in the pit of Cory's stomach.

"These are Trask guys," Rose said.

The twinge froze into an icy lump. Paul was a Trask guy. "A—work accident? But I thought it was a car crash."

"It was. On a road near the project. Two in the truck, one in the car. They were just flown in." She took hold of Cory's arm. "One's your old boy friend, Farron."

Cory's breath became thick and strangled, as though she were swallowing a fistful of yarn. "Is he—badly hurt?"

"I don't think so. One of them's worse than the others, but it isn't him. He was a passenger in the truck." Rose let out a deep breath. "What a madhouse! We're setting up cots in the hall."

Habit and training got Cory through the next couple of hours. Her first concern on seeing Paul was to make sure that his face was unmarked. She peered down at him in the makeshift bed, her heart in her anxious eyes. All the feeling she had ever had for him came flooding back at full tide. Her gaze sought every well-remembered feature. His mouth was different, so pale and flaccid. But the good, straight nose was the same, and the wing of brown wiry hair. She didn't think she could have borne it if that handsome young face were to be mutilated by scars.

Then she thought, Dear God, a few facial cuts

would be nothing compared to badly damaged internal organs. Or what about his limbs, his spine? Fright gripped her. How still Paul was, lying there as though he were dead. Quickly she pulled in her runaway fear with reins of reason. He was sedated. He was resting comfortably. He would be all right.

His chart showed several broken ribs, a fractured forearm, multiple lacerations and contusions. Her heart wrenched in sympathy. Poor Paul.

"The one who was driving the car," Rose told her, "is in traction with both legs broken, plus a lot of internal injuries. His chest was crushed against the steering wheel."

Cory stayed after her shift was over to be there in case Paul awakened. But he was in a deep sleep, and at last she had to leave. On her way out she saw Dr. Gozallis sitting on the edge of his desk, looking like some sort of long-legged bird amid a nest of papers and X-rays. She glimpsed him taking off his thick glasses with one hand and rubbing his eyes with the other, and she overheard him say, "John, those other two will have to go to Fairbanks tomorrow. We can't keep them squeezed in like this."

He probably meant Paul and his companion. Cory walked slowly away. Fairbanks—Paul would be sent there to recuperate. He wouldn't be able to work for some time. While he had been in Trask Valley he had to come back and forth to Kovarik. There had always been the chance that she would see him. But now that was all changed.

14

"Of all times for Mrs. Federico to deliver," Loretta grumbled as Cory came in the next morning. "A week early, and we're so jammed."

"Sure was inconsiderate of that baby," Cory said dryly. She had little time to spend gabbing. All she was interested in was Paul. Questions crowded her mind. How was he this morning? Could he talk to her? Would he be leaving right away?

There was another question, which would have bothered her a few weeks ago. Did people know this was the man who had deserted her for someone else? Since Rose knew, probably everyone from her to the North Pole knew. But Cory didn't give it a second thought.

At the first opportunity she made her way to Paul's room. He looked so pale and despondent that her heart turned over. One arm was in a cast. The bed was partly raised, and he was sipping fruit juice through a straw.

"Hello, Paul."

"Cory." His dull eyes seemed to brighten. "I was wondering if I'd see you."

She felt a catch in her throat. He thought about me, maybe even longed for me. "How are you?"

"Lousy." He put down the hardly tasted drink. "Talk about rotten luck, to be in a head-on crash."

From what I heard of the accident you're lucky to be alive, Cory thought, but diplomatically refrained from expressing it.

She was afraid he would ask her about the other two victims and become disturbed by the news. His friend from the truck had more injuries than he did. The third man was in critical condition. But Paul didn't inquire about either one.

He moved restlessly in bed. "They told me they're flying me to the hospital in Fairbanks. Probably haven't the right equipment to treat a person in this butcher shop of a place."

"Paul, this hospital's okay, it's just overcrowded."

"Well, I'm glad to be going. Got no faith in that nearsighted quack."

Cory opened her mouth to defend Dr. Gozallis and then closed it. People were often unreasonable when they were ill and agitated. "Do you know what time you'll be leaving?"

"Right after lunch, they said."

She felt a sick little twist in her stomach. A few hours and he would be gone. She knew now that ever since she had told him to go away, she had held a secret hope that he would return. He only had to ask again and she would take him back. Wouldn't she? Wouldn't she?

Cory felt the color rushing to her face and busied herself tucking in the blanket, avoiding looking at

Paul. She had the crazy feeling that she might cry. He was leaving, and she couldn't even spend this last short time with him. She must see to the gall-bladder patient and the diabetic and the rest of them. She took a deep breath to keep her voice steady.

"Paul, is there anything I can get you? Anything I can do for you?"

He looked up at her and shook his head.

"I'll come back in a little while," she promised. "Before you go." Why? For one last glimpse? For a painful good-bye? She only knew she had to see him again.

"Cory, wait a minute." Paul's eyes had become feverishly bright. He half pulled himself up and grabbed her wrist. "There's something you can do. Come with me, Cory! Come on to Fairbanks!"

He had asked her! She stared into his pale face and then at her hand, which hung from his grip like a broken lily. At last she found her voice.

"You mean just quit my job and everything?"

"Why not?"

Why not indeed? It was true, then—he had missed her, too. His fingers tightened on her arm. "Please, Cory. We'll make a new start."

A smile touched the girl's mouth, and her heart pounded with joy. To go with Paul, to take care of him and stay beside him. Wasn't that why she had journeyed to Alaska in the first place? Who else was alone and needed her? Not Leon. Not Quinn.

"Oh, Paul, I couldn't get away right now, but I could follow you a little later. First I'd have to make some arrangements." She laughed excitedly. "Hey,

give me back my hand. I really have to get on with my work. But I'll be back here as soon as I can."

He looked into her face and smiled. His hand slipped from her wrist to her fingers, and he squeezed them tightly. "Hurry."

Cory flew to her duties, her mind awhirl. Let's see, I'm working till the end of this week, then I planned on going to the Swifts. The Swifts. She felt a quick rush of regret. She probably wouldn't have a chance to see them. She would be leaving for Fairbanks as soon as she finished out the week. Would Dr. Gozallis expect more notice than this? Surely he would understand. Her place was with Paul.

Once she paused by a window to gaze at part of the small city stretching out toward the regal mountains in the distance. Would she ever come back to Kovarik again? Perhaps, to wait for Paul, if he returned to Trask Valley after his recovery. In spite of her heartache, she had been happy in Alaska. She had made some good friends—the Swifts, Edie Lamont, Quinn—

A queer ache rose in her throat, and she turned from the window and went on with her tasks. Quinn. She should go and say good-bye to him. But immediately a shadow crossed her face, like a bird flying over a pond. What made her think Quinn would miss her? He had the beautiful Elaine.

Cory put Quinn out of her thoughts and concentrated on immediate plans. When she encountered Loretta, it was hard not to gush out her news. But on seeing Dr. Gozallis, she avoided any personal talk in spite of her feeling that in all fairness she should let

him know at once that she was leaving. Mundane matters crowded her mind. She hadn't much money. She would have to find work in Fairbanks immediately, and a place to stay. She wouldn't know a soul.

The rattle of lunch trays was filling the hall before she had an opportunity to hurry back to Paul. She found him eating with a healthy appetite the foods he liked, and making a face as he pushed aside the chowder and rice pudding.

He looked up eagerly as she approached. "All set?"

"Well, no," she admitted, and added with a little laugh, "Please, give me time!"

He leaned forward. "Cory, you really are coming with me, aren't you?"

"As soon as I can. But not today, Paul. That's impossible."

He sagged back in the bed. "Once I'm gone I'm afraid you'll change your mind."

She touched the hand that stuck out of the cast. "No, I won't."

"I'll need someone, Cory. I'll be stuck there, sick, with no friends, nobody." His eyes roved desperately. "You know, I'm not going to sit still for this. Somebody's going to pay; if not the insurance people, then I'm suing that stupid idiot."

Cory's eyes widened. "Who do you mean?" The other driver, the man who was in critical condition?

"That dimwit in the Buick. He had the whole road, not another person on it, and he had to come plowing into us. Rotten eyesight or drunk or something. I know I've got a case." He looked at her intently. "You see how it is, Cory? There'll be a lot of

running back and forth to lawyers and insurance agents, filling in forms—all that stuff. You'll help me, won't you?"

As his words penetrated, Cory felt a great lurch of doubt. After a while Paul noticed her silence and the look on her face.

"What's the matter? Oh, I get it." He lay back wearily on the pillow. "You're shocked because I'm being practical, looking ahead."

Cory put her hand to her forehead and tried to think. "Paul, are you sure you want us to get together again?"

"More than anything."

"When you get better, are you going back to Trask Valley?"

"Not on your life, dead broke or not. Don't you see, Cory? A settlement from the crash could get me out of this Godforsaken place."

Broke? "But I always thought you made good money."

"Sure, but there's nothing to do out there for recreation except play cards, and I never had much luck at gambling." His tone became coaxing. "Everybody sues in collisions, Cory. It's routine. The insurance companies expect it. So why shouldn't I cash in?"

All this talk about lawuits. She felt herself crumbling inside. "I'm confused, Paul. Do you want me as your girl or just someone to run errands?"

His face puckered up with irritation. "Come on. This is no way to treat a sick man. Listen, if you were the one who was down and out, I'd take care of *you*."

She looked at him with speculative eyes, and he

seemed to read the two words she thought but didn't speak: I wonder.

His irritation deepened to anger. "As soon as you find out I'm broke, you don't want me, is that it?"

Cory's face flamed. "You don't know me at all, do you?"

Paul glanced around—there was very little privacy—and seemed to gain control of his anger. "Look, we're getting spectators for the big fight scene." He lowered his voice. "Let's stop wrangling. You want to get out of this place, don't you? We can go together."

"What makes you think I want to leave Kovarik?"

"Who in his right mind would stay in this hole of a town? Besides"—his look was knowing—"it's sort of embarrassing, isn't it? That gal with the kid, stealing your mining man right from under your nose."

"How did you—?"

He waved the question away. "You hear things. She used to go out with a friend of mine."

Oh, he knew how to poke little needle jabs that stung and hurt! If he'd heard about Quinn and Elaine, he'd have used that, too. Cory gazed at him in a peculiar, objective way, almost as though she were seeing him for the first time.

"Paul, I don't think it's going to work," she said in a dead voice.

"Sure it will, and we'll do lots of catching up when I'm better." He reached over and clasped her hand. "I'm counting on your help, Cory."

Slowly she drew her hand away. "Get somebody else to do your legwork," she said tonelessly. "And good luck in court."

Before she turned away Paul seized her arm; his eyes were blazing. "I had a hunch deep down you weren't sincere. I *knew* you really wouldn't come. Just teasing me along, getting even about Roo."

Tears were near the surface, and Cory was fiercely determined not to let him see her cry. He could believe what he wanted. It didn't matter. She pulled away from him and stumbled into the refuge of the empty rest room, where she let her tears fall unheeded.

When she came out, the ambulance stewards were getting ready to take the Fairbanks-bound patients to the airport. Cory walked calmly down the hall without a backward look. But her mind was in chaos. For the rest of that day and evening she went over the morning's events, step by step, as well as her entire relationship with Paul Farron.

Paul had needed her because he was helpless and ill. But would he want her when this crisis was over? Hadn't that been his pattern, to lean on someone when things were not going well?

She recalled with startling clarity how low and moody he had been after the quarrel with his father. She had come along, a sympathetic listener, a willing slave, with her heart in her eyes. He had turned toward her with such fervor that in no time they had become engaged.

Then he had gone to Alaska. Cory, apparently, had been easily forgotten. Roo had appeared attractive and eligible. In the course of their ripened acquaintance the hasty wedding had occurred. Roo loved him; she was willing to make a go of the marriage.

But Paul had second thoughts. He used the first pretext he found to get out of it.

But he came to me at Mrs. Webb's place, Cory thought suddenly. He *did* try to patch things up. If he didn't want me, why would he risk doing that? The truth dawned on her slowly. It was really not much of a risk. He knew that Cory had pride, that she wouldn't jump at his first offer. Paul had come to save face, to prove that he was not as bad as he seemed. He had rightly guessed that Cory wouldn't fall directly into his arms. And if this car accident hadn't occurred, she would most likely never have heard from him again.

His plea this time had been genuine, but once he was on his feet again, how much attention would he pay to Cory Hanson?

She sighed deeply. Paul had so much going for him! Good looks, vitality, a charming manner. She now saw these qualities as only a hollow shell. Love was a two-way street. You had to be a giver as well as a taker. Ah, Paul, Cory thought with a touch of sadness, when will you ever learn?

15

The smells of autumn were in the air, the leaves dyed crimson and gold. Waterfowl, winging their way south, looked like black cross-stitches in the sky. In spite of the natural beauty around her, Cory was not finding at the Swifts' the peace of mind she had sought. It was too quiet; there was too much time to think.

She had arrived on the weekend as expected. Charlotte had been quick to discern dark crescents beneath the girl's eyes, a finely honed thinness in her face. Recent pain or disappointment of some sort had left its mark. The woman was tactful enough not to mention it. If Cory wanted to disclose confidences, she could do so without pressure.

For her part, Cory told her friend only the bare essentials. Paul Farron had been one of three men involved in a car accident. Since he wasn't critically injured, he had been sent to the hospital in Fairbanks.

"You wouldn't believe how crowded we were; every bed was taken." Cory fidgeted, looking past Charlotte. "He's leaving Alaska. He asked me to go back home with him. But I felt it was all over be-

tween us, so—" Her voice broke off. How could you sum up almost a year of deep feeling in a few blunt sentences?

They spoke of other things. Charlotte said, "The Lindahls want you to see little Madeline Cora when you get a chance. They're living a few miles out of Kovarik now."

After a while Cory found that she could smile as she told Charlotte about Leon's impending marriage. Later, when Quinn's name came up, she was able to say without rancor, "I saw him with his girl friend, a good-looking honey blonde."

"Oh? I don't recall any honey blonde. Of course, people change their hair color."

Cory shook her head. "She came from somewhere else, where they'd known each other before. Her name's Elaine."

"Well, he's had a lot of girl friends."

"I think this one's special."

Charlotte was looking at her in a thoughtful way. In a minute she would start one of her good-intentioned little lectures. To forestall this, Cory said lightly, "See how my romantic case history goes? Three men I knew up here picked three other girls." She turned her attention to the dog. "How about that for shattering my ego, Skookum? Come on, boy. At least *you're* faithful to me! Let's have a good run."

She took off with the husky bounding at her heels. Charlotte watched the slender figure in navy pants and a light blue sweater, her forehead becoming corrugated with little worry lines.

Behind the house in the thick, wild grass Cory

played with the lively animal until she was out of breath. "Oh, Skookum, no more!" Panting as much as he, she flopped down and hugged him, burying her face against his rough coat.

I have to get out of the house, she thought, do something, go somewhere. She had only been here one night, and her melancholy mood was closing in. Charlotte's eyes were too sympathetic, her tone too kind. Next Cory would be blubbering all over her shoulder.

"Over what?" she asked the dog, stroking his ears in the way he liked. "Over Paul, or Quinn, or lost love in general? That's the stupid part, Skook. I feel sad and empty and I don't know why."

After lunch Charlotte suggested that Nathan take a nap. "You look peaked. Now get a short rest before office hours." The fact that he didn't resist showed how tired he really was.

"Come on, Cory, you and I can sit in the living room." She picked up her teacup. "Pour another cup for yourself and bring it along."

She meant well, but a cozy talk was the last thing Cory wanted.

"Do you mind, Charlotte? I feel like getting out, taking a walk or a ride."

"The jeep and the truck are there. Help yourself."

"Why don't you come for a ride with me?"

"No, you go ahead. Patients might start coming along."

It's better, anyway, if I go off by myself, Cory thought. Maybe I'll look in on Edie and little Betty

Egruk. To assuage her faintly guilty feeling of escaping from Charlotte, she offered to do any errands the doctor's wife might have.

"No medicine for anybody, but you could drop off some tobacco Nate has for Sam if you're out that way." Charlotte put a little package of tobacco and a handful of book matches into a small paper bag, which Cory thrust into the pocket of her blue windbreaker jacket, along with a scarf. As she backed out the truck Skookum barked, begging to come. Cory steeled herself against the doleful plea in his eyes. Anyone she might visit had dogs, and she had learned from experience that animals did not always behave agreeably toward each other.

She stopped at Jim's store. For the Lamont and Egruk children she bought chocolate bars and packs of candy mints, stuffing them into her empty pocket. She also got cookies, two large packages of the cream sandwich kind, which, Jim said, had come in fresh that morning. These she set beside her on the seat. She was glad that the store had been busy, giving the florid-faced man no opportunity to tell her any news of his niece. Today she was simply not in a receptive mood to the problems of Roo Ellman.

Out on the road her spirits lifted. The afternoon was clear and sunny with just enough cotton-candy clouds for contrast in the blue sky. The mountains looked soft and purply in the distance, with an ethereal floating quality that belied their granite bulk.

She would go to Sam's first. He wouldn't ask personal questions, and with a slight encouragement

would embark on lengthy conversational voyages about his past experiences. For Cory this would be a refreshing diversion today.

For some distance the road wound beside the river. Wild shrubbery flourished along the banks, and birds called out and swooped around a narrow marshy channel. The Oralo seemed deserted. Cory glanced idly at it from time to time, dark green, powerful, and inscrutable.

Suddenly her attention was caught by a grimy white rowboat bobbing gently near shore. Automatically she braked to a stop and leaned out her window. The prow of the craft faced the bank. The boat lay alongside a fallen tree trunk that extended into the water like a pier, with its bulging roots clinging solidly to the bank.

Cory saw somebody in the boat move. She jumped out of the car and ran toward the riverbank. A small black-haired boy in jeans and a gray sweatshirt was maneuvering the heavy oar in a clumsy way and seemed to be in trouble. Was he trying to get back to shore? What if he got the boat out into the current instead?

"Wait!" Cory yelled. "Stay there!"

He turned and stared at her. It was Tommy, the untamed little eaglet of Charlie Egruk's brood. His body moved as though poised for flight.

Dear God, I mustn't alarm him. If he jumps up, the old scow might tip over and dump him into the river. Cory swallowed a lump that had risen to her throat. She dropped her flailing arms and slowed to a walk.

"Tommy," she called in a friendly tone, "stay there a minute."

Not moving, the boy sat looking at her with suspicion and hostility. She had to use all the control she possessed not to rush out on the tree trunk and pull him to safety. To reassure him, she forced herself to pause on the edge of the bank where the thick roots of the fallen tree were entangled like ossified snakes.

Easy does it. "Is that your father's boat?" She smiled at him.

Tommy crouched down, watching her, and she feared she had said the wrong thing. The boat undoubtedly was forbidden to him.

"Do you want to come ashore? I'll help you." She began to move slowly along the thick trunk. It's weight was steady from the deep roots and branches caught firmly below water.

The boy said nothing and seemed to shrink back. Could he talk? Did he understand her?

Cory's eyes went to the green water flowing beyond her, and she felt a great throb of fear. Watch your step, Hanson. Careful. She reached the old rowboat, and kneeling down on the log, grabbed the side of the boat, trying to hold it still.

"Tommy, take my other hand and climb out onto the log."

He leaned away beyond her reach.

"I have candy in my pocket. Come on, let's go back on shore and have chocolate bars."

No response. Cory showed him a candy bar. His eyes seemed to devour it, and she was tempted to throw it to him. But she needed bait to draw him out.

"Please, Tommy, come on. Nobody's going to hurt you." She was getting cramped from her uncomfortable position. If only there were some way she could tie up the boat to the stump. But she saw no rope or line.

How had Tommy gotten into this fix, anyway? She assumed that Tommy, free to roam around, had probably chanced upon the old rowboat in this quiet little backwash. He had climbed in and was fooling around with the single oar when she happened by. I wish someone else would come along, Cory thought desperately. But a glance at the road showed no vehicle in sight but her parked pickup.

"Tommy, please come closer. Give me your hand." Cory set one foot inside the boat and held on to a sturdy branch of the fallen tree. "Come, that's a good boy. I have another kind of candy, too."

His huge black eyes were fastened on her face with all the terror of a trapped animal. To be feared like this was a dreadful thing. Cory felt waves of helplessness and futility taking hold of her. Soon her stance had become impossibly awkward. Holding tightly to the branch with one hand, she put her other foot into the flat-bottomed vessel. It swayed a little, and she clawed at the log with her free hand. When the old craft again settled into its gentle motion, she turned toward the child and said softly, "See? I'm in the boat, too. Let's go have a picnic on the grass with the candy. Okay? I have cookies in the truck, too. Come to me, honey. Grab my hand. Please!"

Despite Cory's efforts at remaining calm, her tone became shrill. The child scrambled farther back. His

sudden movement rocked the boat and shook loose her grip on the branch. Frantically she strove to regain it, but the boat had already moved far enough away to put the log and its limbs beyond her reach.

Cory dropped down and seized the oar. Panic had not yet taken hold of her. But she was confused as to which way to force the boat back toward the log and shore. Balky and recalcitrant, the boat turned about eventually, and she plied the oar furiously, trying to move it in the right direction. She threw a hasty glance at Tommy, huddled at the far end, and gasped to him, "Don't worry, we'll be all right!"

But were they really all right? To her dismay Cory realized that the craft was slowly but surely drifting outward. Once it left the restraining arm of the fallen tree, she could never bring it back. Oh, God, she had made things worse than ever!

She rowed strenuously, but fright and inexperience negated her attempts. She could tell when the bow of the boat caught the edge of the current. There was a slight quickening beneath them, which seemed to emphasize the ineffectuality of her wild straining. Then the boat moved into the Oralo's flow.

As they left the protection of the fallen tree trunk Cory gripped the rough seat, the useless oar beside her. Panic rose up as she felt the strength of the surging water below them. They would be drowned! Tipped out and gone in a matter of seconds. Who could swim in those powerful depths? Her throat gave up a strangled groan, and she stared woodenly at the small figure hunched in front of her as though she had never seen him before.

It was the child's eyes that drew Cory back to reality. They were enormous, awash with terror. She was terror-ridden herself, and she sat unmoving, clutching the seat as the old boat swept down the river. But she had regained control of her mind. Though her voice was shaky, she spoke her thoughts aloud to reassure the boy as well as herself.

"So far we're all right. The old hulk doesn't seem to leak. If both of us sit tight, what's the worst thing that can happen? A scary ride down the middle of the river. Somebody's sure to see us from the road, or another boat will pass by. Or they'll find the pickup sitting there and go looking for us. Hey, we're not even wet!"

She didn't mention the little waterfall she had seen that thunder-stormy day with Quinn. Those rapids were more than sixty miles away, near Kovarik. But there could be others—

"No, I remember that day in the Dupres' motorboat. We went this way and it was okay. I guess we're lucky to be on this side of the mill, too. No big logs to crash into."

Although if they had been near the mill, rescue would probably have occurred quickly. She glanced over at the road. It was farther away than she thought.

"Let's call for help, Tommy. Someone might hear us. One, two, three—*help, help!*"

He crouched down, biting his lip, as Cory shouted again and again. Her calls sounded loud in the still, clear air, but did they carry very far? To her consternation she saw that the Oralo was curving away from

the road, going into a stretch of wilderness. Still, fishermen or somebody would surely pass by.

Cory dug a chocolate bar from her pocket. Leaning forward, she said, "Don't get up." She tossed it into Tommy's lap and was gratified to see him quickly unwrap and eat it. She wondered again whether he could speak. Thank God he was staying still. What could she do if he became violently hysterical?

She gazed at him speculatively. "Wow, did I foul things up, rushing to your rescue when I don't know the first thing about boats! Maybe if I'd kept driving you'd be safe at home by now." And again, maybe he wouldn't.

Sunshine lay warmly on them and breezes rumpled their hair. Cory looked about her. Meadows on one side, forest on the other. No homesteads here. Without a rudder the boat followed the pull of the current, lazily turning this way and that, then swiftly shooting forward for long stretches. The surface was smooth and there was no tossing, for which Cory breathed a prayer of thanks.

All at once she saw a narrow strip of rocky beach. If only they could head in there! She seized the oar, but the deep water was too strong, and the boat twisted away on its own erratic course. Disappointed expletives burst from her as she gazed ruefully back at the receding haven.

On they went. For a few moments the sun was obscured, and Cory squinted up at the sky. The cottony clouds had darkened, gathering into great rolling masses. She couldn't suppress a slight shiver. Oh, let them be found first, before the rain came! She had

seen how the sudden, heavy Alaskan rainfall could swell a waterway.

All at once Cory sat forward, frozen with new fear. Ahead on their right the trees thinned out, and jagged formations of boulders lined the bank. Some jutted out into the river, and Cory knew that beneath the surface others lurked. What damage the rocks could do if the old scow rammed into them!

It was drifting leisurely for the moment. She grabbed the oar and attempted to manipulate the boat into the main current. Either she was lucky or had caught on to the procedure of rowing, for the boat moved out and slid safely past the rocks.

"How about that?" Cory breathed, encouraged. "If we reach a calm shallow part, I might get us ashore yet."

Tommy still looked at her, but not so constantly and without the dread. At times he gazed about relaxedly, as though they were on a Sunday canoe ride in a lake.

"Look!" Cory pointed. Ahead, framed by a grassy field, stood a log cabin. "Help!" she called out. "Help! Help!"

The boy sat up straight. "Help!" he yelled.

Cory's eyes fastened on him in surprise and joy. Nothing was wrong with that voice! "Good! Let's call again."

They did, without getting a response, and soon the cabin was left behind. "Someone could have heard us and might investigate," Cory said to the child. He had retreated again into his shell of silence, and she let him be.

How much time elapsed, or how many miles they traversed, Cory had no idea. She was still confident that they would soon be found. When she didn't return within a reasonable time, the Swifts would start inquiring. Or a passerby might report the truck abandoned by the river. The Egruks would be looking for Tommy, and the old boat might be missed. Possibly by putting everything together, the searchers would come to the right conclusion.

The sky had amassed a menacing army of rainclouds, and a slight wind had risen. The water took on a brownish hue. At intervals small birds darted across the river. Cory's uneasiness returned as the boat was carried along. She hadn't thought they would go so far. Where and when was this unscheduled trip going to end?

Then she noticed a wide curve ahead. Part of it seemed very still. If they could reach this quiet angle, they might be able to get to shore, where a grove of small young trees, easy to grab at, came down to the water's edge. Cory took the oar, but try as she might, she couldn't control the old boat. To her despair it began heading into a different channel, which branched off sharply. She struggled to stay on the main river. If they got into those woods, it would be harder for rescuers to find them.

"Will you look where we're going!" She threw down the oar in disgust as the boat moved steadily along the tributary.

Tommy's eyes went from her to their surroundings. Not wanting to scare him, she made idle conversation in as cheerful a tone as she could muster. Good

thing he was used to this wild country. Apparently he was more frightened of strangers than anything else.

They kept going and the sky grew darker. They were a good distance away from the main Oralo now, deep in a wooded region, and Cory was worried. But the boat was slowing, the water becoming more shallow. She peered ahead and saw masses of reeds on one side. At that moment she thought she felt a few drops of rain.

With the oar she steered into the tangled reeds. At last the boat came to a stop. But how deep was the swampy water around them? Maybe they couldn't wade to shore. Across the river lay a wide spit of sand, which would be a better place to land. Now that the boat had finally stopped, Cory was reluctant to move it out again. But the water between them and the little beach was not swift, and she decided the risk was necessary. Out of the reeds, she soon found that she could pole the boat through the shallows. Rain gently dotted the water as she forced it halfway onto the sandbar.

Immediately Tommy leaped out and took off toward the woods.

"Tommy, come back!" Cory shrieked. Then she thought of something. "Help me beach the boat! It's too heavy. I need your help!"

She made herself turn toward the boat and tug at it. "I can't do it by myself!" Cory thought she heard his returning footsteps through the sound of the rain but was afraid to look. Then she saw a pair of brown hands near her own on the boat, and she had to fight off tears of relief.

The boat was far too heavy for them to pull and drag, but the ruse of doing so had worked. Cory looked for a securing rope, but there was none.

"Hey, it's raining hard now! Let's get under the trees."

She held out her hand. Tommy didn't take it, but he did hurry along with her. They found a burrowed-out spot under some thick shrubbery that offered shelter of a sort. Cory didn't want to wander too far from the river. And she would have to watch Tommy every minute, because he might take a notion to bolt away.

She gave him a candy bar and ate one herself, mourning the cookies left in the truck. Rain fell heavily, and although there was no thunder, Cory felt intimidated by the unfamiliar forest sounds. Such noise all of a sudden! Large tree branches were tossing, there was the rustle of countless leaves, and above all was the steady beating of the rain pounding on the earth, on logs, on the river.

She slipped her arms out of the waterproof windbreaker and drew it over her shoulders and the child's. She wanted to put her arm around him as they sat huddled together, but feared the gesture might endanger their precarious relationship.

The rain spent itself quickly. They were somewhat wet, but not soaked. "Let's go back and see if the boat has much water in it." Cory vaguely envisioned the pair of them sleeping in it if they weren't found before nightfall. They hurried beneath dripping branches and over bare patches that had become black mud.

Tommy ran on ahead of her. "Look!"

Cory gazed at where he pointed. Even as she watched, the boat slipped from the sand spit, sloshed into the water, and drifted away. She stood with her hands on her hips. "Well, we never could've gotten that thing going against the current, but it would've made a good bed. Anyway, we're not lost, Tommy. We can follow the river on foot and get back to the Oralo."

She whirled around as a twig snapped and a small animal scuttled into the underbrush. Out of nowhere came the thought of bears, and Cory stood there petrified. She tried to get hold of herself by chattering on.

"I don't think there're any snakes, are there, Tommy? Say, it's cold in these damp clothes." She snapped her fingers. "You know what we need? A fire. It has to be in a safe, open place. How about that little beach? And the smoke will be a signal! They'll see it and come after us."

For a moment a small gnat of worry buzzed in her head. She had no lighter or matches—she didn't smoke. Then came the happy memory of Sam's tobacco and matches, safe in her jacket pocket.

But the comforting fire never became a reality. Every stick and pine needle on the ground was sodden. Cory used nearly a book of matches before giving up.

"No dry wood! I could scream!" She gave a vicious kick to the little campfire she had built, scattering it in all directions.

Tommy gazed at her, pop-eyed. She knew she

shouldn't display impatience and disappointment in front of him, but how much could a person stand? She flung out her hands almost defensively. "Well, it's the last straw." She flopped down glumly on a log, beating at the pesky insects that swarmed incessantly around.

The sun came out again, timidly at first and then stronger, and its rays cheered Cory beyond measure. "Come sit with me in the sunshine." She was touched by Tommy's acquiescence and grateful for the long Northern day. It would stay light and, hopefully, sunny for a while yet. Steam began to rise in vaporous mists from the wet earth around them.

"Here's your dinner, Tommy. Suck, don't bite. Make them last long." She handed him a package of candy mints. He popped one into his mouth and said, "Good."

"What color was it?" Cory wanted him to keep talking, but instead, he thrust the package out for her to see. Then he busied himself floating twigs in a little pool.

After a while Cory said, "Let's spread some firewood out to dry." One moment she was jumping up from the log, the next she was sprawled on the wet ground with her right foot twisted cruelly under her. Were the lumpy knotted roots, treacherously half hidden, the culprits that had tripped her?

Pain shot through her ankle as she pulled herself up, wincing when she tried to put her weight on the foot.

"A sprain, that's all I needed!" Cory wailed, hobbling to the log to sit down. She eased up her pants

leg and examined the injury. Walking back to the main river was out of the question now. She bound up the ankle as well as she could with her scarf. It was going to swell, no matter what.

About half an hour later they heard the hum of a plane. Cory frantically waved her blue jacket, and Tommy ran up and down the sandy strip, yelling and waving his arms as she told him to do. But the plane never altered its course.

"If only we had dry wood, campfire smoke—they'd have seen it!" Cory was ready to cry.

Twice the procedure was repeated, and for the first time that day an utter hopelessness took hold of the girl. What if they weren't found? She smothered the thought and concentrated on how they would get through the night.

Their little shelter was the only dry spot nearby. She limped over there, with Tommy squirming away when she asked to lean on him. Her ankle was puffed up and throbbing painfully.

"We'll sleep here. Okay?"

He curled up in the nook with his head turned away from her. Their clothes were nearly dry, but it had turned cold once the sun went down. Cory drew her jacket over both of them, glad of the blue pullover sweater she had put on that morning. Luckily Tommy had on a thick sweatshirt. He must have been exhausted, for he went quickly to sleep. Cory leaned over to look at the round face beneath its fringe of black hair. His lashes were curved like tiny satin fans. Oh, God, she thought, I hope they find us. I'm responsible for him. Supposing he runs away

from me? I couldn't even follow him. He's a country child, but this spot is far removed from his familiar woods.

Cory unhooked her narrow leather belt. Gently she slipped the end through a waist loop of the boy's jeans. She rebuckled it, moving the buckle away from him. Now they were chained together, in a way. If Tommy woke up first, he couldn't leave without unbuckling the belt, and his movements would disturb her.

Although she was worn out, pain and nervousness kept Cory awake. The forest was filled with odd furtive sounds. As the light filtered away, her thoughts jumped from one thing to another. She yearned for the flashlight in the truck. When she had left it there —how many centuries ago!—she hadn't counted on being lost in the woods. Yet her whole stay in Alaska had brimmed with unexpected things. Look at what had happened in the last few months, events she had never anticipated. Paul's desertion, Leon's proposal—

A new thought burst upon Cory like a flash of fireworks. Supposing Quinn had been the one to propose? Would she have dawdled and hesitated and finally refused him as she had done with Leon Rand? Her answer was the telltale blood she felt rushing to her cheeks. She put her hands to her warm face. What was this strong, strange sensation? She was aware of what it was *not*. It resembled in no way the schoolgirlish giddiness she had felt over Paul Farron.

Cory stared into the darkness in a sort of dumbfounded awe. Here in this primitive setting, trivial

concerns were suddenly stripped away. Everything seemed to fall into its proper perspective.

So she was in love with Quinn. Her breath caught in her throat at the wonder of it. She closed her eyes and saw his lean, loose-limbed frame, the square-jawed face, the eyes gray as summer rain. She felt again his eager kisses, the strength of his arms, and the memory sent her senses swimming.

To possess and be possessed by this man, to be his wife, sharing his days and nights and establishing a life together—with what joyous alacrity would she embrace that role! How resolutely she would strive to make Quinn's world perfect for him. They would enrich each other with love, comfort, fulfillment.

"In love with Quinn." Cory said the words aloud, softly, tenderly. Could that be why she had rejected Paul a few days ago? Not wholly because of Paul's flawed character or the reasons she had meditated upon awterward? But because, loving Quinn, even subconsciously, and whether or not that love was ever consummated—loving him, she could no longer settle for a lesser man like Paul Farron?

But this love for Quinn—when had it happened? When had she ceased being content to be one of his girl friends and jealously desired nothing short of being the only girl? Cory pressed a fist to her lips. Looking back, she could count the times; yes, she could count the times.

And in Quinn there had been a rapport, a response, too. There had, there had! Cory sat hunched over in the dark, remembering. *He* was the magnet drawing her to stay on in Alaska.

A cold little wind whistled suddenly, and its chill reality wiped out the warm memory. Cory shivered as a bleak truth settled over her like frost. Quinn already had his girl, no newcomer from Oregon with whom he had shared a summer of pleasant dates, but a beautiful woman whose life was already interwoven with his.

Cory was too weary to weep. She tried to forget her aching leg, the hard ground, the cold, and most of all her suddenly desolate heart. She tried not to think of a delayed rescue, bears, storms, disasters. At length she fell asleep from being emotionally drained.

16

Cory awakened to an early-morning sight of dew-jeweled grasses and pale, soft light. Nature seemed to slumber still in the tranquil hush. Cold and stiff, Cory moved and found herself sore in every muscle, her swollen ankle a mound of pain.

She turned toward Tommy and her heart stuck in her throat, blocking her shocked cry. In a frenzy she pawed at her blue jacket, trying somehow to conjure up the child as he had lain last night beneath it, reluctant to accept the mute evidence of his escape: the rumpled jeans still fastened to her belt.

Cory struggled up and lunged blindly around the clearing, heedless of the pains shooting through her leg.

"Tommy, Tommy!" God in heaven, how long had he been gone? She rushed this way and that, calling his name over and over, her voice tinged with a thin edge of hysteria.

It seemed forever, this period of panic. Then it ended abruptly by a small crashing in the underbrush. Cory spun around. Tommy emerged, bare-legged, in his soiled sweatshirt. A crooked bundle of

sticks filled his arms. Slowly he approached Cory and held out the wood like an offering, saying simply, "Dry."

She took the wood as one in a daze. Then tears streamed down her cheeks, and her hands weren't free to wipe them away. Despite those puzzled dark eyes upon her, Cory couldn't control her crying. Dimly she saw the child retrieve and don his jeans. After a while her sobs trailed off into long, shuddering sighs.

With agony in every step, she carried the wood to the sandy beach and washed her face at the river's edge. She felt drained and faint with pain, but gloriously relieved. She knew now that no matter what happened, Tommy would stay with her.

Cory made a fire and complimented him on his resourcefulness. He squatted near her, still wary. They ate the last of the chocolate as their campfire smoke rose bravely in the air.

The plane appeared again in the pearly-gray sky, before the sun had quite risen. Buck Vego, Cory guessed. She knew their smoke had been seen when the craft swooped and dipped before winging away. Soon afterward—oh, welcome sound!—came the putt-putt of a motor on the river. Never had anything looked more beautiful to Cory than Harry Dupre's homely, crumpled face. Within a few moments young David Egruk was leaping from the launch toward his little brother, and Harry and Marge were helping Cory aboard.

She looked back once toward the little shelter

where last night the revelation about Quinn had overwhelmed her, and her throat tightened with a sad, sharp ache.

In answer to Marge's questions, Cory tremulously described how the harrowing hours had begun.

"I'm sorry I caused so much trouble for everybody," she mumbled as they sped toward the Oralo. "I'm afraid I made Tommy's first predicament worse than it might have been."

"Oh, no." The woman shook her head hard. "Don't think that for a minute. The river's dangerous. Lucky for that little kid you came along and stayed with him, or there might have been a tragedy here."

Cory gave Marge's hand a grateful squeeze. "It feels so good to be safe and cared for."

The Lamonts' station wagon was waiting on the road to take Cory and Tommy to Dr. Swift's. Edie ran to Cory and hugged her, then wiped her wet eyes. The Egruk family was also there, with the mother crying and laughing as she embraced Tommy and then pressed Cory's hand. The girl felt lightheaded and weak as she marveled at the number of people swarming around. Had the mill closed down for the day?

"Were those workers looking for us, too? Who was in the search?"

"Everybody."

"All those people!"

"And more. Everybody from here to Kovarik."

Datlow Springs at last. Charlotte and Nathan looked old and rumpled, as though they hadn't slept

for a week. Each took an arm as Cory hobbled into the house, and Skookum nuzzled her legs, making affectionate little whiny sounds.

"Sprain, eh?" the doctor put on his professional manner. "And both of you full of insect bites." He called to Tommy, "Nice, soft bed. But first food. Okay? You come with me."

The doctor was no stranger, and the child obediently followed him. In the doorway Tommy stopped and looked back at Cory, now seated with her sore leg propped up. On an impulse she held out her hand. "Shake?"

He hesitated, then walked over and gravely pumped it up and down. From Tommy that was better than hugs and kisses. As he rejoined the doctor Cory heard the boy say, "Nice lady," and her heart felt as full as her eyes.

"Doctor ordered this sedative."

Cory took the pill Charlotte brought and went on with the short account of her adventure.

"You can tell us all the details after you've rested and had that ankle attended to," Charlotte said.

"There'll be so many people I want to thank for coming to our rescue," Cory murmured. "The Dupres, Buck in his plane—"

"Quinn in his."

Quinn? Cory stared at her. "He was looking for us, too?"

"Probably still is. Came here yesterday to see you, and then found out you were missing." For a moment Charlotte closed her eyes and touched her crooked fingers to them. "Tore out of here like a

wild man, a maniac! I'm telling you, I've never seen Quinn like that."

As in a dream, Cory permitted herself to be nursed, fed, treated, and put to bed. Tommy, after a stack of pancakes, a bath, and an examination that showed few ill effects, was already sound asleep.

She wouldn't be far behind him. The bed felt so soft, so comfortable. But all at once there was a slight commotion outside the dispensary door. She heard low voices and an excited, urgent one.

Who was that hurrying in? Quinn! But with such a strange, haggard face and his hair all awry as he dropped to his knees at her bedside.

"When that girl at the hospital said you were gone, I thought I'd never see you again," he said hoarsely. "I thought you'd gone away to Fairbanks—with him."

His wonderful, heartening presence! Cory felt drowsiness creeping over her, but she had to make him understand. With this man she couldn't be anything but honest.

"Quinn, remember that high opinion you had of me? Well, if you'd seen me the other day you wouldn't think I was so devoted." She struggled to stay awake. "You were right. There is no loyalty in women. Paul was broke and hurt, lying flat on his back and asking me to stick by him. And do you know what I did? I walked away."

Quinn leaned forward, and his voice was low and steady. "I've seen you, and I know what I saw. That first day I saw a girl following her heart because she couldn't bear the silence and the separation. And

then I heard about the shock she got, a jolt that must've knocked the props from under her. On the heels of that came the emergency at the mill, and I saw this girl put her personal grief aside and pitch in at the hospital. A girl who was bruised but not beaten."

Cory's eyelids seemed weighted, and she tried to open her eyes wide to gaze at him.

"I saw her later showing compassion for the girl who took her man," Quinn went on. "And when she could have found an easy solution through marriage to someone else, she didn't take it, because she felt her lack of love would not be fair to him." He clasped her hands in his. "Oh, little Cora Lee, I felt myself falling in love with you and didn't want to face it! I always thought Farron was unworthy of you, but Leon Rand—" He shook his head in a troubled way. "I thought he could give you a better life than I could. I had the feeling that maybe you were beginning to care for me—"

Cory nodded her heavy head. He saw, and squeezed her hand.

"I didn't know if you'd be happy staying with me in a remote place like this. But now—" When she opened her mouth to speak, he read the question in her eyes before she had time to voice it.

"Elaine. You're wondering about Elaine." He rubbed his fingers along her hand. "She's a good person, Cory. We've known each other a long time. She's gone now, but she came to Kovarik because she needed a friend and some advice." Quinn gave a small shrug. "Maybe she wanted to try and revive

something from the past, too. Anyway, we went out and talked a lot. I told her about you." He looked steadily at Cory. "In all the time I've known Elaine, marriage was never mentioned, nor was love." His voice grew husky. "But oh, Cora Lee, they're being mentioned here and now to you!"

Dr. Swift swept into the room like a great gust of wind. "Get out of here, Quinn," he ordered gruffly. "My patient has to get some rest."

Quinn groaned and put a hand to his forehead. "Nate, of all the rotten timing!"

Cory was slipping away fast, so that their words came to her as though wrapped in thick wool. There was one thought she wanted to hold on to for a while longer, something that she felt was important.

Let's see, what was it? She had come to Alaska to find her man. That was it, but there should be more. She tried to focus her thoughts.

She had come to Alaska to find her man. Her gaze rested briefly on Quinn. She had found him. That was the thought she had been seeking.

Contentedly Cory drifted off to sleep, but not before she had heard bells ringing and a nightingale's song.

Nurse Of The Midnight Sun

MARY COLLINS DUNNE

Cory Hanson didn't consider herself a man-chaser, but it was six months since her fiance, Paul Farron, had left Oregon for an engineering job with the Trask Valley project in Alaska—and she missed him! After writing Paul that she was flying out for a vacation, she gave up her apartment and her hospital job and boarded the plane for Kovarik.

Once she reached the small sawmill town of Datlow Springs, Cory had to wait two weeks for Paul's arrival. When he finally showed up, it was with the overwhelming news that he had just gotten married.

Though Cory wanted nothing more than to return to Oregon immediately, an accident at the mill changed her plans—and laid the foundation for a surprising turn of events in the Land of the Midnight Sun.